



Rs 8.00

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

**or AWAKENED INDIA**

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



ISSN 0032-6178



9 770032 617002

**February 2008**  
***Discovering Sri Ramakrishna***

**Vol. 113, No. 2**

# THE ROAD TO WISDOM

## SWAMI VIVEKANANDA ON *Basis of Vitality*



### Why the Body Succumbs to Disease

**U**NTIL the body is in a state to admit the germs, until the body is degraded to a lower vitality so that the germs may enter and thrive and multiply, there is no power in any germ and in the world to produce a disease in the body. In fact, millions of germs are continually passing through everyone's body; but so long as it is vigorous, it never is conscious of them. It is only when the body is weak that these germs take possession of it and produce disease.

### Yoga keeps the Body Healthy

Q.—Does Yoga serve to keep the body in its full health and vitality?

[Swamiji's] A.—It does. It staves off disease....Disharmony in parts of the body is controlled by more flow of the nerve currents towards them. The Yogi ought to be able to tell when in any part pain is caused by less vitality or more. He has to equalize that....These nerve currents go on all over the body, bringing life and vitality to every muscle, but we do not feel them. The Yogi says we can learn to

do so. How? By taking up and controlling the motion of the lungs; when we have done that for a sufficient length of time, we shall be able to control the finer emotions.

### Prana: the Energizer

Prana is not the breath; but that which causes the motion of the breath, that which is the vitality of the breath, is the Prana. Again, the word Prana is used for all the senses; they are all called Pranas, the mind is called Prana; and so we see that Prana is force. And yet we cannot call it force, because force is only the manifestation of it. It is that which manifests itself as force and everything else in the way of motion. The Chitta, the mind-stuff, is the engine which draws in the Prana from the surroundings, and manufactures out of Prana the various vital forces—those that keep the body in preservation—and thought, will, and all other powers.

*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,*  
Vol.3, 304; Vol.5, 232; Vol.1, 521,173,232.



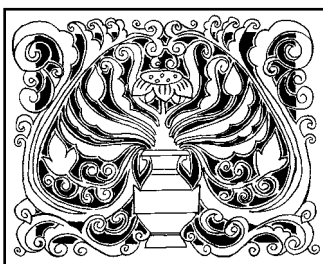
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Vol. 113, No. 2  
February 2008

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Amrita Kalasha

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### INTERNET EDITION AT:

www.advaitaashrama.org

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Kamarpukur

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		Annual	3 Yrs	Life (20 yrs)	Patron (25 yrs)
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Sri Lanka & Bangladesh	(USD)	\$ 5	\$ 13	\$ 55	\$ 110
All Other Countries	(USD)	\$ 27	\$ 75	\$ 320	\$ 640

Rates mentioned in foreign currencies depend on the current exchange rates and are therefore subject to change without notice

## FORM IV (see Rule 8)

### Prabuddha Bharata or Awakened India

- Place of Publication: Advaita Ashrama, 5 Dehi Entally Road, Kolkata 700014
- Periodicity: Monthly
- Printer's Name: Swami Govindananda
  - Whether Citizen of India: Yes
  - Address: Advaita Ashrama, 5 Dehi Entally Road, Kolkata 700014
- Publisher: Swami Govindananda
  - Whether Citizen of India: Yes
  - Address: Advaita Ashrama, 5 Dehi Entally Road, Kolkata 700014
- Editor: Swami Satyaswarupananda
  - Whether Citizen of India: Yes
  - Address: Advaita Ashrama, PO. Mayavati, Via Lohaghat, Champavat, 262524, Uttarakhand, India
- Names & Addresses of Individuals who own the newspaper & partners or shareholders holding more than 1% of the Capital.

Swami Atmasthananda, Ramakrishna Math, Belur; Swami Gitananda, Ramakrishna Math Yogodyan, Kankurgachi; Swami Smaranananda, Ramakrishna Math, Belur; Swami Prabhananda, Ramakrishna Math, Belur; Swami Suhitananda, Belur; Swami Bhajanananda, Belur; Swami Srikananda, Belur; Swami Prameyananda, Belur; Swami Suvirananda, Belur; Swami Shivamayananda, Belur; Swami Gautamananda, Ramakrishna Math, Chennai; Swami Mumukshananda, Ramakrishna Math, Udbodhan, Kolkata; Swami Vagishananda, Ramakrishna Math, Mumbai; Swami Atmaramananda, Ramakrishna Mission, Coimbatore; Swami Tattwabodhananda, Ramakrishna Math, Cossipore; Swami Girishananda, Ramakrishna Mission Saradapith, Belur; Swami Divyananda, Ramakrishna Mission, Malda; Swami Bodhasarananda, Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati.

I, Swami Govindananda, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief

Dated: 1 February 2008

S/d  
Swami Govindananda  
Signature of the Publisher

# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत । *Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!*

## *Sri Ramakrishna*

February 2008

Vol. 113, No. 2

वैराग्यविद्या निजभक्तियोगः शिक्षार्थमेकः पुरुषः पुराणः ।

श्रीरामकृष्णैक्यगतः शरीरी कृपाम्बुधिर्यस्तमहं प्रपद्ये ॥

I dedicate myself to that Primal Person who, being an ocean of compassion, embodied himself as the combined manifestation of Sri Rama and Sri Krishna to teach the art of renunciation and devotion to him.

योऽसौदैत्यपतेर्वधाय भगवान्नाश्वर्यरूपः स्वयं

धृत्वा श्रीनरसिंहमूर्तिममलां सत्यावतारो वभौ ।

त्रेतायां दशकन्धरं सहसुतं रक्षःकुलञ्चावधीत्

वीरो दाशरथिः सुखैकनिलयः श्रीरामचन्द्रो हरिः ॥

He who in the Satya Yuga assumed the wondrous immaculate form of Sri Narasimha to slay the demon king Hiranyakashipu, and in the Treta Yuga that of the heroic Sri Ramachandra, the son of Dasharatha and the one source of all happiness, to destroy the ten-headed Ravana, his son, and the rakshasa clan—

आसीद्वापर आगते ब्रजवधूकान्तो नितान्तं हरिः

स्वप्नेमामृतदानदक्ष सुतनुःकृष्णावतारः स्वयं ।

घोरेऽस्मिन्युगशेषसङ्कटदिने श्रीरामकृष्णो हरि-

राविर्भूय कलावगाधकलुषाक्षाता जनानामसौ ॥

Who, in Dwapara, himself incarnated as the beautiful Krishna, the beloved of the gopis, bewitcher extraordinary, generous in bestowing devotion to Himself; the same Hari appeared in the troubled times of this final yuga, Kali, as Ramakrishna, to redeem humans from the muddy depths.

विचक्षणा यच्चरणोपसादनात् सङ्गं समुत्सृज्य विशुद्धमानसाः ।

विन्दन्ति हि ब्रह्मगतिं सुदुर्लभां श्रीरामकृष्णाय सुखात्मने नमः ॥

I salute Sri Ramakrishna, the blissful Self, by reverentially approaching whom the wise get rid of attachment, become pure in mind, and realize Brahman, so difficult to attain.

—Pandit Ramendra Sundar Bhaktitirtha,  
*Sri Sri Ramakrishna Bhagavatam*

# THIS MONTH

Though he was part of nineteenth-century history, genuine spiritual seekers continue to find in Sri Ramakrishna an unfailing refuge and guide. **Discovering Sri Ramakrishna** often proves a seminal event in the lives of spiritual seekers. This number explores some facets of this discovery.

If the messages of some religious teachers outlive their lives, it is because they apprehend the spiritual needs of the times with unerring accuracy and provide lasting spiritual food. In **Sri Ramakrishna and the Religion of Our Times**, Swami Bhuteshanandaji, twelfth president of the Ramakrishna Order, provides lucid insights into some of the reasons for Sri Ramakrishna's relevance to our times. The text is an edited transcript of a lecture by the swami.

Not only was Sri Ramakrishna a perfect exemplar of the veracity of Upanishadic revelations, his life and teachings also provide unique insights into the meaning of otherwise abstruse Upanishadic statements. Swami Vireshanandaji, Editor, *Viveka Prabha*, Mysore, elucidates this in **Sri Ramakrishna and the Teachings of the Upanishads**.



Meeting Sri Ramakrishna in person would usually be an occasion to remember. The **Reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna** by his direct disciple Swami Yogananda remind us of the powerful spiritual influence of the Master. The text

has been compiled and translated by Swami Chetanandaji, Minister-in-Charge, Vedanta Society of St Louis.

Though the concept of avatara, the Incarnation, presents a significant challenge to religious thinkers, realization of its spiritual significance is vital to

one's spiritual fulfilment. Swami Samarpananandaji, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur, focuses on some aspects of this concept in **Sri Ramakrishna and Avatarahood**.

**The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Guidebook for Sadhana** is a survey of the insights provided by Sri Ramakrishna into the world of sadhana. The author, Br. Sushantachaitanyaji, is a monastic member of Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur.

Sri Ramakrishna—guru of countless spiritual seekers—has been an inspiration to many an artist as well. In the fifth instalment of **The Many-splendoured Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta**, Dr M Sivaramkrishna, former Head, Department of English, Osmania University, Hyderabad, discovers for us his influence on some eminent musicians as well as Western sadhus and spiritual seekers.

Researchers continue to unearth important, hitherto unknown facets of Swami Vivekananda's life and work that help us better comprehend his message and legacy. Sri Asim Chaudhuri of Phoenix is one such indefatigable researcher. **The 'Twelfth Student' at Thousand Island Park** is a fresh product of his research and forms a part of his new book, *Swami Vivekananda in America: New Findings*, an Advaita Ashrama publication.

Swami Sanmatranandaji of the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Viveknagar, takes us on a fascinating journey into the history, legend, architectural uniqueness, and spiritual tradition of the famous Tripureshwari Temple, Agartala, in **Mother Tripureshwari: The Matrix of Synthesis**.





## Discovering Sri Ramakrishna

“YOU are my own,” Sri Ramakrishna said to his intimate devotee, M, “The same substance, like father and son.” “All of you [the intimate devotees] are coming here again,” he added; “When you pull one part of the kalmi creeper, all the branches come toward you. You are all relatives—like brothers.

What was this relation that Sri Ramakrishna was suggesting? He used to say that devotees formed a separate caste by themselves, among whom distinctions did not hold. Their devotion brought them together into a family. Moreover, to God, devotees ‘are his own. He always stands by them.’ The relationship that devotees cultivate for God is not only reciprocated by the Deity, but also generates natural bonds of affection and respect among themselves, ties that are often much stronger than familial bonds.

But while the relationship between devotees is ‘brotherly,’ Sri Ramakrishna saw his own relationship with the devotees as parental, ‘like father and son.’ So did the devotees. Taraknath, who later came to be known as Swami Shivananda, saw in him ‘my tender, loving mother waiting for me.’ The naturalness of this relationship rested on deeper roots than ordinary human ties.

As he completed his Herculean sadhana, Sri Ramakrishna had some remarkable revelations about his own nature and purpose in life. About one of these he later said: ‘Another day it was revealed to me that I had devotees—my intimate companions, my very own. Thereafter I would climb to the roof of the kuthi as soon as the bells and conch-shells of the evening service sounded in the temples, and cry out with a longing heart: “Oh, where are you all? Come here! I am dying to see you!”’

And when the intimate devotees started coming to him, he had equally remarkable visions

about their identities: ‘The Divine Mother used to reveal to me the nature of the devotees before their coming. I saw with these two eyes—not in a trance—the kirtan party of Chaitanya going from the banyan-tree to the bakul-tree in the Panchavati. I saw Balaram in the procession and also, I think, yourself [M]. ... In a vision I saw that Sashi and Sarat had been followers of Christ.’ Moreover, some stood out even in this small group of intimate devotees: ‘Devotees like Rakhal, Narendra, and Bhavanath may be called *nityasiddha* [ever perfect]. Their spiritual consciousness has been awake since their very birth. They assume human bodies only to impart spiritual illumination to others.’

If such were the devotees bound to him with filial ties, Sri Ramakrishna’s self-perception could not be ordinary. He realized that the sadhana he had undergone, and the superconscious states they brought forth, were far from what is humanly achievable: ‘Such a state is never produced in ordinary people. For even a fourth of its intensity would destroy their body and minds. I remained occupied with some vision or other of the Mother during the greater part of day and night; that saved the situation; otherwise it would have been impossible for this sheath (showing his body) to survive. I had no sleep at all for six long years.’

Some of his visions were about himself: ‘I saw Satchidananda come out of this sheath. It said, “I incarnate myself in every age.” I thought that I myself was saying these words out of mere fancy. I kept quiet and watched. Again Satchidananda Itself spoke, saying, “Chaitanya too worshipped Shakti.”’

‘... I saw that it was the fullest manifestation of Satchidananda; but this time the Divine Power is manifested through the glory of sattva.’

The most dramatic revelation of his nature was

made to Narendranath when the latter was sitting by his bedside—just two days before his passing away—thinking, ‘Well, now [in this grave illness] if you can declare that you are God, then only will I believe you are really God himself.’ Immediately, Sri Ramakrishna looked towards Narendra and said, ‘He who was Rama, He who was Krishna, verily is he now Ramakrishna in this body. And that not merely from the standpoint of your Vedanta!’

### Relating to the Avatara

The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* records a valuable conversation on the Incarnation or avatara:

M: ‘You explained clearly, the other day, how God incarnates Himself on earth.’

MASTER: ‘Tell me what I said.’

M: ‘You told us to imagine a field extending to the horizon and beyond. It extends without any obstruction; but we cannot see it on account of a wall in front of us. In that wall there is a round hole. Through the hole we see part of that infinite field.’

MASTER: ‘Tell me what that hole is.’

M: ‘You are that hole. Through you can be seen everything—that Infinite Meadow without any end.’

Sri Ramakrishna was very much pleased. Patting M.’s back, he said, ‘I see you have understood that. That’s fine!’

M: ‘It is indeed difficult to understand that. One cannot quite grasp how God, Perfect Brahman that He is, can dwell in that small body.’

The Master quoted from a song:

Oh, no one at all has found out who He is;  
Like a madman from door to door He roams,  
Like a poor beggar He roams from door to door.

Clearly, recognizing an avatara requires special insight and grace. Sri Ramakrishna observed, ‘Only twelve rishis could recognize Ramachandra. All cannot recognize an Incarnation of God. Some take him for an ordinary man, some for a holy person, and only a few recognize him as an Incarnation.’

Is the historicity of the Incarnation of help in relating to him or her? According to Swami Vivekananda, ‘If you want to be a bhakta, it is not at all

necessary for you to know whether Krishna was born in Mathura or Vraja, what he was doing, or just the exact date on which he pronounced the teachings of the Gita. You only need to *feel* the craving for the beautiful lessons of duty and love in the Gita.’ ‘He who liberates others is an Incarnation of God,’ Sri Ramakrishna pointed out. ‘He descends to earth in human form, as an Incarnation, to teach people love and devotion.’ Both these functions have transcendental components that outlive the historical personality of the Incarnations.

The mythical elements in the story of Rama and Krishna are no less spiritually valuable than the historical elements in Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual life. For these myths are not mere fables or fantasies. As Joseph Campbell, the reputed student of myth, has pointed out, myths make us aware of ‘matters fundamental to ourselves, enduring principles about which it would be good to know if our conscious minds are to be kept in touch with our own most secret motivating depths’. If myths make us aware of the dark recesses of the unconscious, they also help us get in touch with the boundless realm of the superconscious and with beings that history would not allow us to contact.

Romain Rolland wrote about Sri Ramakrishna: ‘The man himself was no more. His spirit had departed to travel along the path of collective life in the veins of humanity.’ In so doing, Sri Ramakrishna was entering the realm of the mythical, making himself directly available to all of us at all times. In responding to his call, we have to approach him through our own inner spiritual and mythical being. ‘Without awakening one’s own inner consciousness one cannot realize the All-pervading Consciousness.’ ‘God cannot be seen with these physical eyes,’ Sri Ramakrishna explained. ‘In the course of spiritual discipline one gets a “love body”, endowed with “love eyes”, “love ears”, and so on. One sees God with those “love eyes”. One hears the voice of God with those “love ears”.’ He also assures us that for the sincere spiritual aspirant these achievements are inevitable: ‘He who sincerely prays to God will certainly come here. He must.’





# Sri Ramakrishna and the Religion of Our Times

Swami Bhuteshananda

**S**RI RAMAKRISHNA'S life is a unique example in spiritual striving and realization. In matters of catholicity, broadness, depth, and simplicity, he remains unsurpassed in religious history. Swami Vivekananda wrote to his disciple, Alasinga Perumal: '[Sri Ramakrishna] was the object-lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Shastras (scriptures). ... The books were theories, he was the realisation. This man had in fifty-one years lived the five thousand years of national spiritual life and so raised himself to be an object-lesson for future generations.'<sup>1</sup>

## ***Bhakti as Yuga-dharma***

The term *yuga-dharma* means 'the religion of our times'. Generally speaking, a *yuga* refers to a period of four or twelve years, though in the Puranas a *yuga* is a much longer period. A *yuga* also refers to the period of influence of a great person. Thus there are the *yugas* or eras of Sri Ramachandra and Sri Krishna. Similarly, these days, reference is made to Sri Ramakrishna's era. The characteristics of an era are called *yuga-dharma*. Like time, dharma cannot be cut into pieces. Nevertheless, as with *time*, the term *yuga-dharma* is also used in a relative sense. The times of the Vedic rishis and of Sri Ramachandra are respectively known as the Satya and Treta Yugas. The advent of Sri Krishna marks the end of the Dwapara Yuga and the beginning of the Kali Yuga. Each of these Puranic ages has its own special feature or dharma. In the Satya Yuga, people strove to realize the ultimate Truth through the acquisition of knowledge. The Treta Yuga was characterized by sacrifices (*yajna*) and ritual works. In the Dwapara Yuga, the emphasis was on devotional service. In the Kali Yuga, the constant chanting of

God's name and devotion as taught by Narada comprise the *yuga-dharma*.

In the Kali Yuga, the human intellect is neither suited for the subtleties of Vedanta nor for the extravagant works and sacrifices of the Treta Yuga. In this age human longevity and strength are limited, and it is not possible for us to follow the ways of the other ages. That is why we have been told to follow the path of devotion. Sri Ramakrishna would often refer to Narada's system of devotion as ideal for the Kali Yuga. What is Narada's system? It is the path of pure, unconditional love for the Divine. This supreme love for God is termed *bhakti*.

Narada speaks of *parama-prema*, which has a special significance. Generally, people worship God to ask favours of him. Behind our love for a person or an object there is usually some ulterior motive. We love only that which gives us joy and happiness. But then why do we love ourselves? It is because it is impossible for us *not* to love ourselves. I am always the beloved of myself. This is not supreme love, because supreme love has no motive behind it and, apparently, nothing is to be gained from it.

Narada says that the love which has no motive behind it and whose current flows towards God is *parama-prema*, the highest love. This love is the highest because there is nothing greater than it. I love God for God's sake. Narada says, God is to be loved because he is lovable, and not for any gain. This is unconditional devotion. It is said that those who are immersed in their blissful Self (the *ātmārāmas*) are in constant communion—and play as well—with the Lord, who is the eternal fount of joy that is within their own selves:

*Ātmārāmāśca munayo  
nirgranthā apyurukrame;  
kurvantyahaitukim bhaktim-  
itthambhūtaguṇo hariḥ.*<sup>2</sup>

Thus they do not call on God to fulfil any desire. They have no desire whatsoever. What do they need to ask of God? Nothing. Then why should they adore him? Because they cannot help doing so. It is in their very nature to love God. God is such that one cannot but love him.

‘But is that really so?’ one may ask; ‘As for myself, I can well live without loving him.’ The answer to such doubts is this: We are ignorant of God’s real nature, so we look around hither and thither for love—in material comforts, in sense objects, amongst blood-relations, and everywhere else. This ceaseless searching leaves us unsatisfied, because whatever we catch hold of turns out to be just a pale and dim reflection of the supreme Love. Thus our search remains unfulfilled. In this way, as we plod along slowly, the realization finally dawns on us that it is only because God exists somewhere deep within us as our very own inner being that we love him. Why do I love myself? It is because I am actually the Soul, and to me my inner Self is forever the beloved. Why do we love God? It is because he abides in all, and is naturally the beloved of all. This is Narada’s way of devotion, which is unconditional love for God.

### **The Object of Supreme Love**

In the Bhagavata it is said that God’s name has such a magnetic force that none can resist the love it embodies. It is not that we do not love God; actually, we cannot catch him. We do not know where he is. In Hindi there is a song which says that the musk-deer’s hunt for the intoxicating scent of musk is in vain because the musk is actually present in the deer’s own navel: *nabha-kamalme hai kasturi kaise bhram mite pashuka re*. Similarly, we are searching for the bliss of God, from which we can never be separated. We can never be deprived of that divine bliss. It is just that we do not know where to find it. We search for that bliss everywhere. We search for

it in the objects of the five senses. We search for it in form, taste, smell, sound, and touch. These five sense objects continuously send us on a wild goose chase. Like the musk in the navel of a deer, bliss is within ourselves and flows all around us from the core of our being. Failing to locate it, we run here and there, seeking that bliss in wealth or human relations. Within us is infinite bliss, but it remains concealed because we do not know ourselves. There are, in effect, so many sheaths covering the ‘I’ that it is not possible to catch even a short glimpse of the real ‘I’. We have laboured hard for ages trying to identify ourselves with and taste that undiluted joy. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* says: ‘All these creatures are evolved from that Bliss; having been born, all are sustained by that Bliss; and finally all move towards and merge into Bliss.’<sup>3</sup> The soul is that Bliss itself. To reach it, the paths of knowledge, work, and devotion were practised in the Satya, Treta, and Dwapara ages respectively. Having lost all our bearings in this Kali Yuga, we cry out, ‘O Lord, we want you alone.’ This is unconditional love.

In his aphorisms on bhakti, Narada makes no effort to know or analyse the object of love. That is why he merely speaks of devotion ‘to him’ (*asmin*). We may be attracted towards different objects, but none of these is the greatest. All worldly objects are conditioned. Love without any self-interest is possible only towards the Supreme—not even towards oneself, because this petty ego is limited. Vidyapati says, ‘How many Brahmas [as also Vishnu and Shivas] have been born of you—[through the ages]—and have merged back in your being; much like the waves on the ocean. But you, Lord, have neither beginning nor end.’ Such is the object of supreme love. While creating life, God is Brahma; while preserving it, he is Vishnu; and he is Shiva while destroying it. But who is the thread through the three? God, Ishwara. He is Brahma as well as Vishnu and Shiva; and he is also beyond these forms. Narada has referred to this great principle as the one object of love. Sound cannot describe him; intellect cannot understand or define him. The Vedas themselves admit failure in trying

to describe his nature. The one who is beyond the vibrations of sound, he is the beloved, the one to be cherished. Having failed to reach him through devotion, works, and meditation, confused by his projected multiplicity, we finally surrender, saying, 'O Lord, I do not know who you are; you are what you are. Be merciful towards me.'

Is it possible to love such a being? Yes, it is. When our love is pure, we do not bother to judge the qualities or activities of our beloved. We have no expectations from the beloved. By giving up everything, we experience total fulfilment.

In the Kali Yuga, Narada's way of devotion is to be preferred because human intellect is no longer sharp enough—as it was in the Satya Yuga—to dive deep into scriptural truths. Our life too is limited, restricting the scope of our aspirations. No wonder then that we plead: 'I am unable to do all this. O Lord, have mercy on me. I want you. Manifest yourself to me. I have no other desire.'

On taking a close look at Sri Ramakrishna's life, we find that he pursued the path of knowledge and, like the wise ones of yore, attained supreme knowledge. Although he did not engage himself in elaborate sacrificial works, Sri Ramakrishna undertook stern disciplines which are beyond the ken of common aspirants. He also practised the disciplines of Christian, Muslim, and other religious traditions. Through these sadhanas he came to the one conclusion that all paths lead to the same goal. All his experiences led him to the one principle whom pandits call the Spirit or Atman, whom devotees adore as Bhagavan, whom the work-oriented people know as Ishwara, and whom the yogis realize as the Supreme Self (*paramātmān*). That is why Sri Ramakrishna is considered unique among the sages, devotees, workers, and yogis. His *Gospel* is a treasure trove of knowledge. He himself is undoubtedly a bhakta. His life is an example of karma and yoga.

### **The Many Faces of the Divine**

Who is this person whom we call Sri Ramakrishna? Regarding this, let me narrate one of his parables. Sri Ramakrishna said that a man once saw an unfa-

miliar creature on a tree. This interesting creature was red in colour. He came back to his friends and said, 'I have seen a fantastic flaming red being on the tree yonder.' Just then another person said, 'I was at that place just a little while ago, but what I saw was deep green in colour.' Other people too joined the debate, and they all began to argue and quarrel, each claiming to be right. Meanwhile another person arrived and asked, 'Why do you fight?' After hearing everything, he broke into laughter and said, 'All of you are right. I stay under that tree and know the animal. It is a chameleon. It changes its colour from red to yellow, and from yellow to green, and sometimes it has no colour.' Sri Ramakrishna is such a person. He has taught us the truth about the infinite Brahman. How shall we refer to him? Is he a man of learning or action? Is he a bhakta or a yogi? No adjective can fully describe him. People see him from different angles. We view him from a narrow perspective and infer *that* to be the whole. So we squabble amongst ourselves. Sri Ramakrishna came to put an end to this discord. That is why, viewed from the path of knowledge, he is a jnani; viewed from the path of yoga, he is a yogi; viewed from the path of action, he is an ideal karma-yogi; and viewed from the path of love and devotion, he is a bhakta. In him are all the colours of the rainbow.

Jesus Christ said, 'In my Father's house are many mansions.'<sup>4</sup> God can be viewed from many angles. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says that the ocean is the ultimate goal of all rivers. Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavadgita that to each one God appears in the form in which he or she worships him.

These are beautiful sayings. But it is unfortunate that they do not stir our inner being and find an echo in our hearts. In every generation great people have come to remind us of that which we have forgotten. For example, the *Shiva-mahimnastotra* asks us to choose from the Veda, Sankhya, Yoga, Pashupata, or Vaishnava doctrines the one which is most suitable for us. According to our inclinations, we trace a curved or a straight path, but as all rivers ultimately reach the sea, each one of us will reach God. This *stotra* synthesizes various

paths and teaches harmony, but we have kept it imprisoned in our books. There are many similar scriptural statements, but no matter what is said, we fail to put into practice the wisdom enshrined in our scriptures.

Sri Ramakrishna said, 'As many faiths, so many paths.' These are the very thoughts of the *Shiva-mahimna-stotra* or even more ancient works like the Gita and the Rig Veda. What is special about Sri Ramakrishna? His uniqueness lies in the fact that nowhere in the history of religions has there been an instance of one individual practising different faiths and realizing in his own life the truth that all of them lead to the *one* principle. It is irrelevant whether Sri Ramakrishna is accepted as an Incarnation or a prophet. Looking at the life of the personality that appeared before us as Sri Ramakrishna, we see that having pursued so many paths with an infinite thirst for knowledge, he came to the conclusion that in different tongues all speak the same language. This is the truth he realized. He did not ask us to accept his words blindly. Sri Ramakrishna is neither a fictitious character nor a popular legend. He is a historical personality. He was in this world just over a hundred years ago.

### **Experiencing the Truth for Oneself**

Sri Ramakrishna provides us with the unique instance of discovering the truths of the scriptures of different religions through direct experience. This was not a case of general inference like one's coming to the conclusion that all crows are black after seeing a few crows. Sri Ramakrishna himself practised various faiths. His conclusion was based on a firm foundation, for he actually reached the same goal after treading different routes.

Now, can it be said that to follow this truth is the religion of our times? Yes. The word 'religion' should not limit and narrow us. If we accept Sri Ramakrishna as the starting point of a new age, then it is clear that the religion of our times is not only to tolerate all faiths but to go deeper than mere tolerance. Our attitude towards all religions must be one of equal respect. Sri Ramakrishna knew the

weaknesses of our minds. That is why when people criticized religions other than their own, he asked them whether they had reached their conclusions after practising other faiths. Being oneself in the dark about something, one has no right to criticize it. All that is possible is to affirm or deny one's faith in a particular religion.

Without a firm conviction in one's own beliefs, it is impossible to go forward. So, we must make our own foundation as strong and firm as possible. Progress towards the truth is not possible without adhering to one particular view. We have neither the time nor the capacity nor the patience to test everything. But we should never indulge in maligning other faiths. We have not as yet tested them. Without knowing the value of nutritious food by actually eating it, is it possible to come to a decision about it?

### **Today's Religion and Sri Ramakrishna**

To meet the needs of the age, great spiritual personalities—who by example of their lives teach us how to live—are born from time to time. It is as if to establish this truth that Sri Ramakrishna appeared amidst us. Sri Ramakrishna, the avatara of our times, held up before us the catholic views of this age. Not only did he give us the principles of universal religion, he also added a fresh dimension to it. He said that if we can worship God in stone images inside temples, can we not worship God in human beings? Sri Ramakrishna awakened us to the possibility that, as conscious beings, each one of us can be seen as a reflection of the Supreme. Is not the omniscient also omnipresent? If that is so, and if natural objects like wood, stone, and water can be the focus of worship, then why not human beings, whose evolutionary level is much higher? This is the thrust of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching, and it is attuned to the requirements of the present age.

Although all these ideas can be traced to the scriptures, in Sri Ramakrishna's teachings they take a new import. When these teachings are applied to the practical field we benefit in two ways. First, there is no dearth of such 'images' or objects of ad-

oration, and these can be found in our very midst. Second, if we worship these ideal forms, then the world itself gets transformed. The spiritual significance of this outlook is again twofold. It is a common impression that religion was not intimately connected with our lives. A special characteristic of dharma, we always thought, lay in the aspirant diving into the depths of realization. But Sri Ramakrishna's universal outlook has given us the vision that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. He pervades not only all that is living but is present in gross matter too. Conversely, it would be belittling the Almighty if we were to think that he is confined within the limits of images of stone, wood, or clay. Sri Ramakrishna saw God not only in human beings but in all living creatures—in animals and plants as well. He felt terrible pain in his chest when a person walked across a patch of tender grass with which he felt identified in ecstasy. Has such an event been witnessed ever before?

I am thinking along these lines only to have a better understanding of Sri Ramakrishna. Looking at the aforementioned characteristics, one has to admit that Sri Ramakrishna is a shining example of today's religion. I am not saying, 'the religion of Sri Ramakrishna'. We do not want another sect in Sri Ramakrishna's name. He was against all forms of sectarian conflict and compared sects to the thick clustering of worms in marshes. That is why Swami Vivekananda said that contraction is death and expansion is life. The more we enlarge and expand ourselves, the closer we shall get to attaining immortality. On the other hand, the more we narrow and stunt ourselves, the earlier will death creep up and lay its cold hand upon us. These indeed are the sayings of the Upanishads. Bliss is identical with omniscience and infinitude (*yo vai bhūmā tat sukham*). Anything that is narrow and limited is death. There is no joy in 'small measures' (*nālpe sukhamasti*). Because we consider our bodies, friends and relatives, possessions, and also our faults as 'mine', we keep moving towards death. We can transcend death only when our 'me' and 'mine' disappears. Our life will then become as vast as the boundless ocean.

### The Best of Devotees

At the time of Sri Ramakrishna's advent, there were few who were reflecting in their lives the truths of the ancient Vedas and Upanishads; these principles remained locked in the scriptures. Intoxicated by the zeal for philosophical arguments, people displayed scholastic skills but could not realize these truths in their own lives. But Sri Ramakrishna made the realizations of the Vedic sages come alive. What infinite compassion and love he evinced! Without playing down the worship of images, he appealed to the Divine present in all.

In mentioning three classes of devotees, the Bhagavata calls lowest those preachers and devotees whose attention is restricted to the image or symbol of worship and who fail to see into the heart of beings or the boundless canopy of the universe:

*Arcāyāmeva haraye pūjān  
yaḥ śraddhayehate;  
na tadbhakteṣu cānyeṣu  
sa bhaktaḥ prākṛtaḥ smṛtaḥ* (11.2.47).

Guided by Prakṛiti, such persons' devotion has undoubtedly been tempered, but it is not as yet stainless and sharp. The minds of such devotees cannot go beyond the symbol. So the universality of the Omniscient escapes them.

Occupying the middle position are devotees who love God and build bridges with others who think alike. These seekers tolerate the ignorant and remain indifferent to the enemies of God:

*Īṣvare tadadhīneṣu  
bālīṣeṣu dviṣatsu ca;  
premamaitrikr̥popekṣā  
yaḥ karoti sa madhyamāḥ* (11.2.46).

It is difficult to define the extent to which the influence of these middle-ranking devotees extends. Love for God is ever-present wherever there is an atmosphere of God-intoxication. And irrespective of the sect, country, or community, a chain of friendship binds the lovers of God together. Such devotees make untiring efforts to bring into the fold all those who are beyond the pale of this love, and have the tendency to overlook those who are foolishly hostile towards the Divine. The middle-

## Sri Ramakrishna's Image

Of the world's religious teachers of the highest order, Sri Ramakrishna was the first to be photographed. Today humanity has among its cherished treasures three different photographic portraits of the Divine Master, who is venerated by many as an Incarnation of God and by many more as a rare type of illumined soul. ...

None of his three photographs, however, portray Sri Ramakrishna on the plane of normal life, because each time he faced the camera he was absorbed in transcendental experience or mystical awareness (called in Sanskrit *samadhi*) while his countenance, radiant with superb joy, testified to the sublimity of his inner consciousness. Looking at one of his pictures Sri Ramakrishna once remarked, 'It is a picture of a very exalted state of yoga. Time will come when this will be worshipped in many a home.' Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna's portrait bears the impress of the state of God-consciousness and is therefore its veritable symbol. It is not possible to render in more realistic terms an expression of that ecstasy of Self-realization which thought cannot attain nor speech disclose.

The meditative poses of deities and of spiritual leaders such as Sri Krishna, Buddha, Shankara, and others delineated by Indian iconography are coloured more or

less by the conceptions of the artists.

Sri Ramakrishna's whole personality was so suffused with divine love, purity, wisdom, and bliss that even in his lifetime he was recognized as the Supreme Spirit incarnate in human



form. His image is therefore a genuine representation of the Divinity. I firmly believe that this sacred icon will help immensely in removing the veil of ignorance from the hearts of men and women and in revealing unto them the spiritual Reality it typifies. ...

... God-men are the very embodiment of moral and spiritual principles. Their images signify the highest ideals. Worshipping God through such images is not idolatry. The great spiritual leaders are the best exemplars of their own teachings. Their lives demonstrate the truths they preach. ... Their human forms are the images of divine attributes.

—Swami Satprakashananda


ranking devotee is always hopeful that a change will transform such people.

Who is the greatest among devotees? One who sees God's existence in all beings, and all beings as grounded in God, the Self of all:

*Sarvabhūteṣu yaḥ paśyed  
bhagavadbhāvamātmanah;  
bhūtāni bhagavatyaṭmany-  
eṣa bhāgavatottmah* (11.2.45).

All is One and the One is all. The greatest is the one who realizes that the universe is God; I am in God and God is in me. I am in the universe; the entire universe is in me.

Through the example of his own life, Sri Ramakrishna established himself as the ideal for devo-

tees. He was both a pathfinder and a pioneer. It was with justification that Swami Vivekananda wrote: 'So now the great conclusion is that Ramakrishna has no peer; nowhere else in this world exists that unprecedented perfection, that wonderful kindness for all that does not stop to justify itself, that intense sympathy for man in bondage.'<sup>5</sup> 

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# Sri Ramakrishna and the Teachings of the Upanishads

Swami Vireshananda

## Prophet of Harmony

**S**RI Ramakrishna is a unique personality in human history. A virtually unlettered recluse from a remote hamlet of Bengal, he raised himself to the position of an epoch-maker in the field of spirituality and remains a marvel in the history of religions even today.

For orthodox students of Vedanta, it is a general rule that scriptural passages are meant to teach a particular point of view, whether it be Advaita, Vishishtadvaita, or Dvaita. This belief is the upshot of a famous aphorism in the *Brahma Sutra*: ‘*Tat tu samanvayāt*.’<sup>1</sup> The term *samanvaya* means reconciliation. The sutra suggests that Upanishadic passages are to be so interpreted as to convey a single meaning. The Advaitins try to synchronize the diverse ideas in the Upanishads to evolve a single concept: non-dualism. In the same manner, the Dvaitins and Vishishtadvaitins like to see their own viewpoints—dualism and qualified non-dualism—emerge as the singular meaning conveyed by the Upanishads. This had led to endless wrangling among followers of different schools of Vedanta, resulting in much confusion. Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings have served as a harmonizing factor in smoothening out such differences of opinion. In this way, Sri Ramakrishna has made a unique contribution to the religious history of India and has emerged as a prophet who embodies the true spirit of the Upanishads. F Max Müller, the celebrated Vedic scholar, paid his tribute to Sri Ramakrishna in the following words: ‘[He] was certainly thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the Vedanta philosophy. His utterances which have been published breathe the spirit of that philosophy; in fact, are only intelligible as products of a Vedantic soil.’<sup>2</sup> Again, ‘the Vedanta

philosophy [is] the very marrow running through all the bones of Ramakrishna’s doctrine.’<sup>3</sup>

## God and the World

The Upanishads deal primarily with the nature of the ultimate Reality, which they denote with three simple but significant terms: *sat*, Brahman, and Atman. Each Upanishad provides a different conceptual approach to the same eternal principle. Divergent opinions surface in various contexts even in a single Upanishad. Nevertheless, we do not find a single instance of chauvinism in the vast Upanishadic literature.

Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings are in consonance with the concept of God found in the Upanishads. His allegory of water in the pond being referred to by different names by people of different religions substantiates this idea. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna himself practised the disciplines of various religious paths, attaining fulfilment through each one. In the end, he declared, ‘As many faiths, so many paths.’ Truly, his life and teachings embody the substance and spirit of the Upanishads.

Description of the nature of God, the universe, and the individual soul forms the crux of any system of religious philosophy. The principal Upanishadic idea is that the phenomenal world derives its existence from the great principle, Brahman.<sup>4</sup> The intention is to impress upon the pupil that the universe comes out of God, exists in God, and goes back to God. ‘Everything is to be covered with God’—this is the process of meditation that the Upanishads place before a spiritual aspirant.<sup>5</sup> They see the whole universe as one entity filled with divine consciousness, the diversity of which is but an



aberration, a conceptual error. Upanishadic philosophy is not passive, as some Western authors think it to be; it is holistic, positive, and dynamic.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, this world is a 'mansion of mirth'. The Upanishads too concede this. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* teaches about *ānanda* or the blissful aspect of Brahman.<sup>6</sup> The *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* says that the sentiments of love and bliss found in the world among humans are but parts of supreme Bliss, which is the very nature of Brahman.<sup>7</sup> Sri Ramakrishna was also averse to a negative attitude towards the world, as he visualized God in every being and God's lila in every phenomenon of this universe. The Upanishads substantiate this idea, stating that one who sees the Atman or Brahman everywhere overcomes all sorrow.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in Sri Ramakrishna we find the perfect ideal of the Upanishadic sage.

A common element in the teachings of the Upanishads and those of Sri Ramakrishna is the conviction that God can be both without attributes and with attributes. If we study the Upanishads independently, we can see that these two concepts of the supreme Reality occur side by side in many places without any ambiguity. We see clearly that according to the Upanishads the ruler of the universe, Ishwara, is the same as the transcendental principle called Brahman. In addition, the same consciousness dwells in each being as the innermost core of the personality. This absolute principle transcends the functions of the body, mind, and intellect, which are the cause of diversity among living beings. Though transcending this diversity, it remains a witness thereof.

### The Human Being

Sri Ramakrishna's teachings drive home the point that the human fall from divinity is due to forgetfulness of our own real nature. According to the Master, the goal of human life is to break this spell of ignorance and realize God. The Upanishads call such forgetfulness *avidyā*.<sup>9</sup> If there is any sin in human life, it is this ignorance, which has pulled us down into a state of degradation. According to Sri

Ramakrishna, both *vidyā* (knowledge) and *avidyā* (ignorance) are in the domain of the mundane world. *Vidyā* is like a friend, it takes us towards the highest goal of God-realization, while *avidyā* keeps us entangled in worldly pursuits.

One of Sri Ramakrishna's significant contributions is in focussing on the central truth that humans are essentially divine. The traditional schools of Vedanta give much importance to *jivanmukti* and *samādhi*, the supreme state of realization, but do not emphasise the idea that human equality must be achieved even in daily life on the foundation of the sameness of inherent human divinity. Sri Ramakrishna, however, encouraged the application of this highest truth—experienced on mystic heights by the spiritual aspirant—even to the ordinary levels of our existence. Truth, if it is truth at all, ought to be manifest at every stage. We cannot make any distinction among humans if we accept the Upanishadic doctrine that the same divine Self is present in the hearts of all. This is the simple fact which Indians failed to recognize for the last thousand years. The result was decadence in India's social fabric. It was left to Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda to bring this grand truth out from the debris of dry philosophical squabbling and show the world that even an otherwise ordinary person is to be looked upon as divine in all conditions and stages of life.

### Life

The Upanishads take a very positive view of life in this world. They deem human life to be an excellent opportunity to unfold our divine nature. The ultimate value of life, according to the Upanishads, is the knowledge of one's own Self, which results in complete freedom from all things limited. There is no genuine happiness in the trifling objects of the world. Real happiness has to be sought only in *bhūmā* (infinite, that is, the Divine). The whole of life is meant for achieving this goal. That person indeed is unfortunate who fails to realize the Truth in this very birth.

Sri Ramakrishna's teachings echo the same idea.

He says that a newcomer to a city first secures lodging and then freely goes about seeing the city. Similarly, after securing one's eternal resting place in God, a newcomer to this world can fearlessly move about doing his or her daily work. Otherwise, when the dark and dreadful night of death comes, one will have to encounter great difficulty and suffering.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, God comes first, then the world. One should live in the world diligently, keeping a major portion of one's mind on God. The Upanishads go to the length of stressing that all thoughts excepting that of God are to be shunned if one wishes to attain immortality.<sup>10</sup> Sri Ramakrishna gives a practical illustration in this regard: The boat is in the water, but on no account should water be in the boat. In the same way, one should live in this world but not allow worldliness to creep into one's mind. The mind is of primary importance. While some Upanishads emphasize that the transcendental Reality is beyond the reach of the senses, speech, mind, and other means of knowledge, others are of the opinion that it is through the mind alone that one can attain the supreme Spirit.<sup>11</sup> In Sri Ramakrishna we find reconciliation of these apparently conflicting views. God, according to the Great Master, cannot be attained by an impure mind, but can be reached by a pure mind. In fact, there is no difference between pure mind, pure intellect, and pure Self. The pure mind itself can act like a teacher and take us to the goal.

The Upanishadic sages, as well as Sri Ramakrishna, emphatically stress the point that one can achieve the goal of life even while being engaged in worldly duties.<sup>12</sup> The majority of teachers found in the Upanishads happened to be kings who were the busiest of people. Many of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples were educated men occupying responsible positions in society. Hence, it is naive to suggest that religious life means otherworldliness.

### **Spiritual Practice**

In the *Brahma Sutra*, there is discussion about whether different Upanishads teach diverse con-

ceptions of Brahman as the object of meditation and, if so, how a Vedantin reconciles these diversities. Sri Shankaracharya explains that meditations are the same because of the similarity of name (*ākhyā*), form (*rūpa*), injunction about performance (*codanā*), and connection with result (*samyoga*).<sup>13</sup> The diverse meditations are to be so interpreted as to sublimate their apparent diversity with an eye to their underlying unity. Moreover, the Vedas aim to show the unity of transcendental knowledge, for in all Upanishads the selfsame Brahman is expounded. The *Katha Upanishad* speaks of 'the goal which all the Vedas with one voice proclaim'; hence Brahman as the object of meditation is the same in all the Upanishads.<sup>14</sup>

The saga of spiritual disciplines undertaken by Sri Ramakrishna is the best illustration of this doctrine. He approached the Divine in both its personal and impersonal aspects and reached the goal. He made no distinction between the two paths. But what he repeatedly emphasised was the importance of *sincerity* in spiritual practice and the need for *intense yearning* for realization of the Divine. According to the Master, these two requirements form the crux of spiritual life, not the nature of the path one chooses. The Upanishads call such an endeavour an adventure. God has directed all the senses outwards, and it is left to the brave, *dhīra*, to turn them inward with great effort and aspiration and realize the indwelling spirit (2.1.1). The Upanishads also warn that the Atman cannot be attained by the weak.<sup>15</sup>

According to Sri Ramakrishna, all the basic human passions can be reduced to lust and hankering after money, which he calls *kamini* (lust) and *kanchan* (lucre). The attainment of a higher spiritual ideal is impossible without coming out of the clutches of these basic animal instincts. Sri Ramakrishna emphatically states that renunciation of these obstacles, physically as well as mentally, is the most important requirement for spiritual growth. This does not mean that Sri Ramakrishna advised everybody to shun the world and retire to the forests. He himself was a married man. On the other hand, he was against any kind of slavery to worldly

**Rationalism of the West** was a marked characteristic of the educated Indians in the nineteenth century. Ramakrishna, who had no English education whatsoever, had no opportunity of imbibing the imported rationalism of the West. Yet, the 'illiterate' priest of Dakshineswar had a critical mind and practical wisdom that more than matched the spirit of the age. His highly rational teachings left a deep impression on the people who came to see him and also on later generations. He had learnt to make the best use of his eyes and other senses in making correct observations. He urged his disciples to develop similar faculties and stressed the need for applying reason before performing any action. Reason alone, he believed, could enable a man to judge the merits and demerits of things. A devotee was not to be a fool. He firmly told his disciples, 'Don't be one-sided and fanatical; that's not the attitude of "this place".' —*Nemai Sadhan Bose*

tendencies. The Upanishads are also explicit in this regard. A sage says, 'What shall we do with progeny (or money)? They do not help us in our pursuit of the knowledge of Atman.'<sup>16</sup> The Upanishads speak of three kinds of desires or *eṣāṇās*: desire for progeny, desire for money, and desire for the worlds (of enjoyment). Only that person who rises above these ultimately inconsequential needs is fit for the highest fulfilment, for the Upanishads declare the state of realization to be that wherein all desires are burnt away, leaving no room for future selfish action. According to them, it is kama or desire that prompts one to act.

The Upanishads speak of two paths: *preyas* and *śreyas*, the pleasing and the good. The former leads to worldly prosperity, *abhyudaya*, and the latter to spiritual fulfilment, *nīḥśreyasa*. Both are important for humans. However, a serious seeker of God chooses the path leading to spiritual fulfilment.<sup>17</sup> Sri Ramakrishna was very judicious in his teachings in this matter. He would teach every person according to his or her capability and past impressions. The Upanishads also teach different types of *upāsanās* or meditations to suit aspirants at dif-

ferent levels of spiritual progress. They never compel everyone to follow the same spiritual practice. Their approach allows for a gradual evolution of the spiritual potential in individuals through graded progression in spiritual practices.

### In Conclusion

The Upanishads stand for unity of existence.<sup>18</sup> Sri Ramakrishna was a living exemplar of this ideal. He upheld the pristine and noble path of spirituality advocated by the Upanishads in ancient times. He enunciated the same great ideals in his simple language so that even ordinary people could be inspired to lead a spiritual life. Sri Ramakrishna thus brought back the ancient golden era of the Upanishads to the modern age through his exemplary life and practical teachings. It was for this reason that the French savant Romain Rolland observed that Sri Ramakrishna was 'the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of three hundred million people.'<sup>19</sup>



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# Reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna

Swami Yogananda

**I**N 1894, on the southern veranda of Balaram Basu's house in Calcutta, Swami Yogananda gave his reminiscences of Sri Ramakrishna to Akshay Kumar Sen, the author of *Sri Sri Ramakrishna Punthi*, and Kumudbandhu Sen later recorded them.

When I was a little boy and had some knowledge about the world, I would think, 'This world is not my home.' While watching the sky, I felt that I had come here from one of those higher starry realms. When my friends invited me to play with them, I felt that they did not belong to me and that my real playmates were in that higher realm. So I was reluctant to play with them. Then an indistinct dream world would manifest in my mind. So quite often I was unmindful and indifferent to this world.

I heard the name of Sri Ramakrishna in my boyhood days, and I saw him many times in Rasmani's temple garden from a distance. But I didn't dare enter his room because of the large crowd. After bathing in the Ganges, I would pick some

flowers and return home. However, I always felt a desire to be with the Master. From my boyhood I had no attraction for worldly things, but I had a natural feeling for the deities. After I received my sacred-thread initiation (*upanayana*), I used to go to pick flowers regularly in the temple garden. I longed to see the Master, so I would walk close to his room.

One day the Master called me and asked who I was. When I told him my father's name, he said, 'Oh, you are Navin's son!' Cordially he took me to his room and asked me to sit near him. I told him all of my childish ideas, without any reservation. Caressing my head he said, 'Whenever you want, please visit me. You are now a new brahmacharin. Practise your spiritual disciplines sincerely and regularly, and repeat your Gayatri mantra.' After he had given me these instructions, the Master became silent and motionless. I looked at him intently. He then slowly began to mutter something that I could not understand. I just watched him in wonder. He then looked at me and gently said, 'Whenever you have the time and opportunity, please come to me.' I replied, 'Yes, sir. I saw you before surrounded by some elderly people, so I didn't dare come near you.' He said, 'Now we are acquainted with each other. Don't be afraid.'

My home was not far from the Dakshineswar Kali temple, so from then on I visited the Master often. I didn't like to stay at home; I was always eager to be with the Master. I also spent some nights in his room. I developed the conviction that the goal of human life is to realize God. The Master's grace and advice made me understand that the main obstacle to God-realization is attachment to lust and gold. So I resolved to realize God by the grace of this great soul. I mentally vowed that I would be a

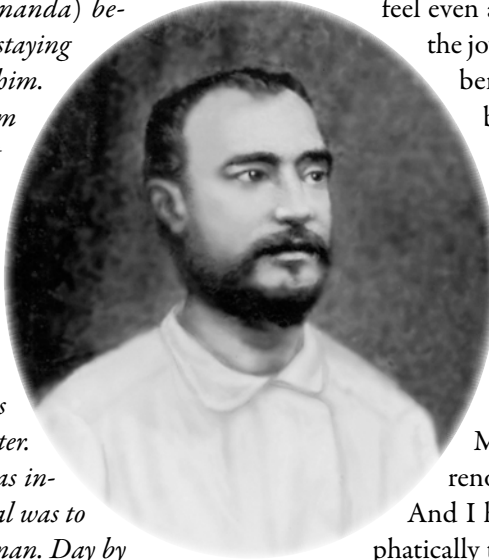
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Swami Yogananda (1861–99) was born in Dakshineswar and met Sri Ramakrishna when he was young. Because he lived near the Kali temple, he was able to visit the Master frequently and serve him. After the Master passed away, Yogananda received initiation from the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and served her until the end of his life. After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away he embraced monastic life, and practised such severe austerities that he died in 1899 at the age of 38.

This chapter has been compiled and translated from various sources, the primary being Kumudbandhu Sen, *Smritikatha* (Howrah: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Ashrama, 2001); and Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*, trans. Swami Chetanananda (St Louis: Vedanta Society, 2003). The translator has interpolated the italicized portions for continuity and readability.

monk; I would never marry and enter family life. I thought that if I were to marry, I would be deprived of the Master's grace. He said again and again that one cannot see God without renouncing lust and gold. Where there is any desire for objects of enjoyment—kama—there is no Rama, God.

*Yogin (later Swami Yogananda) began to spend most of his time staying with the Master and serving him. He did not hide anything from his parents. He told them that he would never marry, and that he intended to practise spiritual disciplines for God-realization. His parents did not like this and forbade their young son to go to the Master. But Yogin ignored their orders and continued to visit the Master. He also went to school, but was indifferent to his studies. His goal was to attain the knowledge of Brahman. Day by day his love for the Master waxed, and he almost stopped going home.*



Swami Yogananda

My absence caused a commotion at home. I told the Master that I had taken a vow not to marry, and that I had informed my parents that my goal was to realize God. I planned to be a monk and practise sadhana, but without my knowledge my parents and relatives were plotting to bind me to the world. One day news suddenly came to me that my mother was seriously ill and wanted to see me. I was very devoted to my mother, so as soon as I heard this I hurried home without informing the Master or asking his permission to go.

When I got home I saw that my mother was quite well. She informed me that they had arranged my marriage and fixed the date. There was no time to delay, and she had summoned me to perform the preliminary rituals for marriage. I was stunned. I emphatically said, 'You may arrange the marriage, but I refuse to marry.' Then my father said, 'I gave my word to the bride's father. If you consider it proper to embarrass and humiliate your father,

please do so.' I also saw my mother crying. I loved my mother very much, and at that critical moment my mother's tears washed away my resolution. They had arranged my marriage beforehand; they were just waiting for my arrival. On my wedding day, my mind was plunged into deep despair; I didn't feel even an iota of joy. In the midst of the joyful uproar in the bridal chamber, I felt depressed. I suddenly

began chanting God's name, and some girls began to giggle. Depressed, I thus passed the days of the marriage ceremony censoring myself.

The main cause of my misery was the thought that I would no longer have any relationship with the Master. The Master was an all-renouncing man, pure and sinless.

And I had told him many times emphatically that I would never marry, and that my only desire was to attain God. What a trick fate played on me! I had re-

cited the marriage mantra, taking on the responsibility to maintain my wife for life. Now I would have to earn money. How would it be possible to practise sadhana as a married man? God-realization was now far from me; I was not even fit to associate with the Master. Even if I went to him, how would it help? How could I show my face to him now that I had ruined my life? He was an all-renouncing monk and I was now a householder. Plunged into terrible despondency, I saw darkness all around. I could find no ray of hope anywhere.

But how merciful the Master was! After my marriage, he repeatedly sent messengers, asking for me. But I had no desire to go to him because I felt that my mind was impure, and moreover I was married. I thought that the Master was calling me because he had some love for me, but I had fallen into a dark dungeon. Would he be able to rescue me from it? His advice was to renounce lust and gold, and now I had made myself a slave of those things. What

would be the point of going to him?

When I did not go to the Master despite his repeated requests, he sent a messenger, saying, 'If you don't want to come here, that is all right. You took money from X of the Kali temple to buy a shirt. You have sent the shirt, but you have not returned the balance or even sent word when you will return it! Is this proper?'

My marriage had cast me into a deep depression and my weakness tormented me. Moreover, my heart was burning because I had lost my connection with the Master. I was terribly hurt when I heard that message from the Master. I thought, 'I might be on the way to being drowned in lust and gold and I know I could not keep my vow and that I lost sight of the goal of my life—but now the Master considers me to be a cheat, though he has known me for so long! He sent a messenger to complain that I had not returned the balance of X's money! He is omniscient. Does he not know or understand my horrible mental condition? My feet are unable to move towards the Kali temple. I am so ashamed and distressed that I cannot go to the Master. I have lived by his words, and today he is complaining that I have not returned a few coins. Well, today I will go to the temple and settle with the man who gave me that money. Afterwards, I will never again turn my steps towards the Kali temple. My mind is weak and aimless, and I am now married, so my holy association with the Master is cut off forever.'

Filled with these heavy thoughts, I entered the temple compound with a mind full of pain, disappointment, and remorse. I saw the Master in the Panchavati talking with Vijay Krishna Goswami and others. As soon as he saw me, he quickly came forward, holding his cloth over one arm. His legs were unsteady as he was in ecstasy. He told me, 'What if you are married? What is there to be afraid of? If you have the grace of this place [meaning himself], even a hundred thousand marriages are powerless to affect you. If you want to live a family life and realize God at the same time, bring your wife here once. I'll make both of you

fit for that. And if you want to renounce worldly life and attain God, I'll make that possible for you as well.'

One day I said to the compassionate Master, 'Sir, you taught me how to overcome lust. Could you do something for my young wife? What will she do the rest of her life?' The Master replied with assurance, 'Don't worry about your wife. Bring her here once, either on a Tuesday or Saturday [days considered auspicious for worshipping the Divine Mother], and the Divine Mother will grant what is right for her.' Accordingly, one day I brought my wife to the Master. He took us both to the Kali temple and blessed her, touching her head. He then said to me, 'All right—you will not have to worry about her anymore.' [After the Master's death, when Yogin became a monk, his wife chose to live like a nun. Her father then supported her.]

*Yogin was born with the attitude of an all-renouncing monk, and this did not change even after he married. He continued to serve the Master as before and to live under his protection. Yogin's parents began to get annoyed when they saw their son's indifference to household duties and to earning money.*

One day my mother complained, 'If you didn't want to earn money, why did you marry?' I replied, 'Didn't I tell you again and again that I had no intention of marrying? But I gave in to your tears.' My mother angrily retorted, 'What do you mean? How could you have married unless you wanted to do so?' Her words shocked me, and I remained speechless. I thought, 'O Lord, I was ready to forsake you to please my mother, and now she talks like this! Forget it! The Master is the only person I have met in this world whose words and thoughts are in perfect accord.' From that day on, I was completely disgusted with the world. After this incident, I sometimes stayed with the Master at night.

*Yogin once spent the day with the Master. That evening he watched as all the devotees took their leave and left for their homes. Yogin then set aside the idea of returning home that night so he could serve the Master if he needed anything. This pleased the Mas-*

ter. They talked about God till 10 p.m.; then the Master had a light supper and Yogin ate his dinner. The Master asked Yogin to make a bed in his room, and he went to his own bed. Sometime after midnight the Master awoke and needed to answer the call of nature but found that Yogin was sound asleep. The Master did not want to trouble him, so he walked alone towards the Panchavati and then to the pine grove.

Yogin had always been a light sleeper. Shortly after the Master left, he woke up to find the door open and the Master gone. Curious as to where the Master had gone this late at night, he checked the water pot that the Master used for washing and found it in its proper place. Then he thought that he might be walking outside. He came out of the room and found no one out in the moonlit night. Suddenly a terrible suspicion gripped him: 'Has the Master gone to the nahabat to be with his wife? Can it be possible that his actions are contrary to his teachings?'

As soon as the above thought arose in my mind, I became completely overwhelmed with suspicion, fear, and other unpleasant feelings. I then decided that although it might be terribly harsh and unpleasant, I must learn the truth. I stationed myself near the nahabat and watched its door. After a while, I heard the slapping sounds of the Master's slippers coming from the direction of the Panchavati. Soon the Master himself was before me. He saw me and asked, 'Well, why are you standing here?' Embarrassed, I hung my head in shame and fear for having doubted him. I could not utter a single word. He understood everything from the expression on my face, and instead of taking offence, he assured me, 'Well, you are quite right. You must examine a sadhu by day and by night before believing in him.' With that, the Master asked me to follow him and proceeded towards his room. I could sleep no more that night thinking about the great offence I had committed owing to my suspicious nature.

Swami Yogananda was one of those rare persons who had complete self-control. One day at Dakshineswar he asked the Master how one could conquer lust. He was then young, about fourteen or

fifteen years old, and had been visiting the Master for a short while. At that time Narayana, a hatha yogi, was living in the cottage in the Panchavati at Dakshineswar and was attracting some people by performing neti-dhauti (a hatha yoga procedure for cleansing the digestive tract). Swami Yogananda said that he had been among those observers. As he watched the yogi practise these disciplines, he thought that perhaps without practising these things one could not overcome lust and see God. So after asking that question, he expected the Master to prescribe for him a particular yogic posture, or advise him to eat a myrobalan or some other thing, or to teach him a technique of pranayama.

In answer to my question the Master said, 'Go on repeating the name of Hari. Then lust will go away.' This answer was not at all to my liking. I thought: 'He does not know any technique so he just said something to pacify me. Does lust go away by chanting the name of Hari? So many people do that. Are they free from lust?' Then one day I came to the temple garden and instead of going to the Master I went to the Panchavati and was eagerly listening to the hatha yogi talk. In the meantime the Master arrived. As soon as he saw me, he called me over and took my hand. While we were walking towards his room, he said, 'Why did you go there? Don't go there anymore. If you learn and practise those techniques of hatha yoga, your mind will dwell on the body and will never turn towards God.' At this, I thought, 'He is telling me this lest I stop visiting him.' I always considered myself to be highly intelligent, so my inflated intellect made me think that. It did not occur to me even once that it mattered very little to the Master whether I visited him or not. What a mean and doubtful mind I had! There was no limit to the Master's grace. In spite of my harbouring such erroneous notions in my mind, he gave me shelter. Then I thought, 'Why don't I do what he told me and see what happens?' So resolved, I took the name of Hari with a concentrated mind. And as a matter of fact, within a few days I began to experience the tangible result that the Master had referred to.





# Sri Ramakrishna and Avatarahood

Swami Samarpanananda

## Religious Philosophy

PHILOSOPHY confounds people. The system of knowledge that is supposed to lead people to truth invariably lands them in a mental maze, where there is no thread of Ariadne to lead the lost to freedom. The morass of ideas and opinions, instead of clarifying one's understanding, acts like a nest of hyperactive spiders that create more and more mental cobwebs. The blind alleys, false trails, circuitous routes, and self-encircling paths in the forest of philosophy leave a lonely traveller on the road to wisdom panting for air. This forest is so vast that even if every individual took a different philosophical trail, he or she would never have to worry about being on the heels of another. On the other hand, it is so rich that even if some persons were to take up a new philosophy every day, at the end of their life they would feel that they had missed much. It is indeed extremely fertile, and also hopelessly possessive of its visitors. None who enter this wildness can find their way out. They have to eat the fruits of that forest, drink the waters of its river—whether clear or muddy—and go into eternal sleep there.

Philosophical systems are innumerable; one may get an idea of this by looking at Indian philosophy. Indian philosophy is said to have six orthodox schools, *ṣaḍ-darśana*. But in Vedānta alone there are scores of conflicting factions, each claiming its own uniqueness, correctness, and greatness. In recent times, God-men have made Indian philosophy all the more variegated.

When it comes to giving birth to philosophies, Western philosophers beat the Indians hands down. Any intelligent person who is good with words gets a brainwave, jots it down, publishes it, and proclaims him- or herself to be the philosopher for

whom the world had been waiting. Even before the last copies of this philosopher's 'path-breaking' work have been sold, there comes another thinker who disproves nearly everything that was said earlier, and even goes to the extent of using uncharitable adjectives for the old masters in the struggle to establish him- or herself as the new messiah. A good example is Schopenhauer, who described Hegel's philosophy (that was, incidentally, the forerunner of Marxist philosophy) as 'a monument to German stupidity'. It is impossible for an ordinary reader to judge the stupidity of either of them, but what one can judge is that it is unsafe to follow these philosophers blindly.

A look at any textbook on philosophy leaves one wondering if God exists or not—indeed, if this world, its creatures, life, matter, mind, or even consciousness exist or not. Even the last citadel of human belief, one's own existence, gets a severe pounding in some philosophies. If the brainwaves of every philosophical upstart, and the *Weltanschauung* of every person be taken into account, it would be impossible for even a supercomputer to calculate and codify all the philosophies that this poor Earth has to bear upon her bosom. But, however numerous and varied be the philosophies of human creation, when seen from the aspect of religion, there can be only two approaches: either one accepts a spiritual dimension of the human being that exists independent of the human body and transcends death, or one rejects this dimension.

Every religious system starts with the fundamental belief in a reality beyond body, mind, and ego. This reality is believed to continue in one form or another even after a person dies. In religions of Indian origin, the soul transmigrates, whereas

in several other religions, the soul goes to eternal heaven or hell after death.

According to non-believers, everything ends with death. They believe in what they observe, and do not believe in anything that cannot be observed, inferred, or verified. In the context of this article, we shall term believers theists (though Buddhists, who do generally acknowledge spiritual verities, would object to this term), and non-believers atheists, though these terms have different meanings in different religions.

### **On Belief and Proof**

Non-observability of a claim or phenomenon—negative evidence—can never become a valid refutation of it. A person born and brought up in an arid desert, who has never seen rain, will not believe that water can fall from the sky. If but one person sees rain, however, the premise that water does not fall from the sky is disproved. The onus of proof (or rather disproof) lies with the non-believer and not with the believer, since one counter-example is enough to confute the premise of the non-believers. One may doubt or question the validity of an observation, but one cannot outright reject it.

On the other hand, even a logical or mathematical proof may not truly reflect reality. Logic can serve only as an auxiliary help to, but not as the main pillar of knowledge. Science is not really as 'scientific' and logical as we think it to be. When Einstein published his papers on relativity, he dealt a fatal blow to the Newtonian understanding of the universe. Then came Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, which states that one cannot measure things in the subatomic world to ultimate accuracy. Moreover, a strong subjective element (in the form of the observer) seems to enter into all such measurement. The probabilistic principles governing the subatomic world are so mind-boggling that even Einstein—acclaimed as the greatest scientist of his time—could not accept it as ultimately true, famously saying, 'God does not play dice with the universe.' But Einstein was unable to prove his stance. In 1931, Kurt Gödel proved the limitations

of mathematical reasoning. His famous second theorem states: 'For any formal theory T, including basic arithmetical truths and also certain truths about formal provability, T includes a statement of its own consistency if and only if T is inconsistent.' Such is the plight of mathematics—considered the mother of all sciences.

### **The Nature of Progress**

Given all we have discussed, still, the development of advanced human civilization can be largely credited to philosophers, thinkers, and scientists. We have, then, a perplexing dichotomy of phenomenal success and monumental folly. On the one hand, our philosophers and scientists are leading us to freedom, on the other, they are chaining our minds with their ideas. We are never sure whether any new theory or thought is really correct or not. Whence this confusion?

Actually, every discovery, every new thought or theory, is an attempt to discover the principles underlying the universe. The statics and the dynamics of the universe are based on an infinite number of ordinary yet profound principles. If observations and phenomena be taken as objects, then principles and theories would be like compartments in a pigeon coop. Swami Vivekananda explains:

The mind, as it were, has stored up numerous classes of ... generalisations. It is, as it were, full of pigeon-holes where all these ideas are grouped together, and whenever we find a new thing the mind immediately tries to find out its type in one of these pigeon-holes. If we find it, we put the new thing in there and are satisfied, and we are said to have known the thing. This is what is meant by knowledge, and no more. And if we do not find that there is something like it, we are dissatisfied, and have to wait until we find a further classification for it, already existing in the mind.<sup>1</sup>

When an observation cannot be placed in an existing pigeon-hole, a new one must be built. Doing so requires insight, which is not a natural thing to have. So, quite often, holes are constructed in the wrong place.

The human mind normally proceeds to grasp new thoughts and things only one step at a time. However, a new theory developed by a master mind may be quite a few steps ahead of the last frontier of the existing knowledge base, or even be a new track, and may thus be difficult for ordinary people to understand. Such was the case in physics with the theories of relativity and the uncertainty principle. These were universally accepted only when more observations were found to fit them, and when the intervening 'holes' were constructed. Many thinkers, inspired perhaps by the revolutionary nature of such concepts as relativity and uncertainty, construct fantastic pigeon-holes in their attempts to explain reality. In most cases, such pigeon holes are not even related to the main pigeon coop! Such theories will inevitably crash on the hard rocks of reality. But till they are utterly destroyed, people strive to hold on to them, propping them up as best they can.

The evident is never questioned. One does not need mirrors to see one's hand. It is the non-evident about which mistaken theories are made, and all the more so when it comes to spiritual truths. Spiritual truths are non-evident for a common person, though they are intensely evident to those few who have realized them. The words of the realized souls and prophets are so powerful that the world is forced to listen, yet it continues to doubt, because spiritual truths are non-evident. The outcome is the birth of innumerable philosophies to prove and disprove spiritual truths.

### ***Theists and Atheists***

Whatever the arguments and counter-arguments may be, the fact is that, religiously speaking, there are only two types of persons in the world: theists and atheists. The real believer or knower of religion, however, is one who has experienced Reality directly, one to whom spiritual truth is evident. Those who profess faith in the words of the prophets, but have not experienced Reality firsthand, cannot be truly called believers; Reality is, for them, not yet evident.

As we discussed above, non-observation cannot

be considered a valid refutation. So, there cannot be a true non-believer. Non-belief is hypothetical—and so fragile that it needs only one blow to collapse. Such was the case with Saul, the prominent persecutor of early Christians. He was on the road to Damascus when he was overwhelmed by a vision of the Lord. He afterwards became the foremost apostle of the Christian faith, known to the world as St Paul.

Either one has experienced the spiritual Reality, or one has not. All those who have not experienced it can be safely grouped together. This places non-believers, sceptics, agnostics, and even the faithful but non-experienced in one group. Only their faith, or non-faith, varies in degree. We can picture a graduated scale, on which acceptance of spiritual Reality is at one end and non-acceptance (at least, on a superficial level) on the other; the semi-believers and agnostics would lie somewhere in the middle of the scale.

We may make a broad classification of people based on religion as follows: (i) Those who believe in spiritual truth through their experiences; (ii) Those who believe that they believe in spiritual Reality; (iii) Those who believe sometimes and do not believe at other times; (iv) Those who believe that they do not believe in spiritual Reality. Every individual belongs to one of these categories, though not necessarily permanently. Religious outlook is a dynamic process, as we see with St Paul. The outlook really gets crystallized only after a direct experience of Reality.

The further branching of religious philosophy begins from these four categories alone.

### ***The Mystery of the Incarnation***

One of the most intriguing concepts in religion is that of the avatara or Incarnation of God. It is a perplexing idea, difficult to understand or accept. A large number of truly spiritual persons do not believe in a personal God, let alone accepting an Incarnation. Some minds will never accept that God could become human. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Hazra says well that Divine Incarnation is only for

the bhakta, and not for the jñāni, because the jñāni is quite contented with his ideal, “I am He”.<sup>2</sup> So even amongst the religious we find some who believe in the doctrine of avatara, some who don’t believe, and some who may be called semi-believers, who swing between belief and doubt.

When it comes to practical life, the true believers are the truly fortunate, because they have experienced Reality directly. Their world-view has been changed forever. Nothing in the universe can shake them or their faith. Nor are they worried about the technicalities of religion, which whirl in the minds of semi-believers.

The non-believers in God or Incarnation are also fortunate, in a sense, because they don’t worry about His existence at all. They simply live their lives, never agonizing over questions of the Spirit.

The semi-believers are delicately placed. There are some fortunate semi-believers who have an intellectual, or intuitive, or devotional acceptance of Reality. They are short just one step from realizing the truth; this makes them the crown-jewels among humanity. They are the great sadhakas, the great aspirants. Their conviction is powerful enough to save them from inner conflict.

### **The Whirlpool of Externals**

The second level of semi-believers are worst placed. We can recognize such people by their actions. They are afraid of dogs, thieves, and the police, but not at all worried about committing wrong acts—even though they claim to be believers of an all-knowing God! Very few of such semi-believers succeed in spiritual life, because of the inherent conflicts in their personality. Hypocrisy extracts its price. Some take a fancy for the secondary details of religion, like finding out when the universe was created, how it was created, and in how many days; whether the material used for creation was in Him, or came from outside Him, and so on. Endless are the technicalities in which one can lose oneself.

An example from the history of mathematics illustrates the damage done by such technicalities:

Zeno of Elea, who flourished around 450 BCE,

offered four mathematical paradoxes, which suggested that motion is impossible. Perhaps the most well-known of these is the footrace between Achilles and the tortoise. The tortoise is given a head start. When the race begins, Achilles must first cover the distance between his starting point and that of the tortoise. By the time he reaches that point, the tortoise will have moved forward. Then Achilles must cover the distance up to the tortoise’s new position. But by that time, the tortoise will again have moved forward. So Achilles can never beat the tortoise. This paradox perplexed philosophers and mathematicians for millennia, before calculus offered a reasonable solution. Fortunately, this problem involved walking and running. What Zeno claimed was impossible, people continued to do. One wonders what would have happened if people had believed this man!

In the philosophy of religion, the same thing happens. A brilliant orator or writer proclaims that religion is but an opiate. Most people are not deep thinkers; moreover, they don’t feel the need of religion on a daily basis, so they accept the idea. They then move away from spirituality. In the case of Zeno’s paradox, the majority did not heed the ‘expert,’ but in the case of spirituality, people often listen only to this kind of proclamation. Those who know the truth caution us—but we are so naive and impressionable!

The whirlpool of religious technicalities easily sucks the unwary aspirant to his or her spiritual death. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna would caution against this tendency of the human mind, often using scathing remarks and humorous rebukes. Once Shyam Basu asked him, ‘Sir, if God alone does everything, how is it that man is punished for his sins?’ Sri Ramakrishna retorted, ‘*Ki tomar sonar bene buddhi!* How like a goldsmith you talk!’ (720) meaning, of course, that his mind was calculating like a goldsmith’s, carefully weighing things.

There are a few people who ask preliminary questions about religion, satisfy their curiosity, and then strive to find the truth. One set of fundamental questions is: (i) Who is an avatara? (ii) What

does he (or she) do? and (iii) How is he relevant to us?

Sri Ramakrishna used to say about his intimate disciples: 'They are satisfied if they can know two things: first, who I am; second, who they are and what their relationship to me is' (459). Indeed, for a spiritual aspirant, the essence of sadhana is finding answers to these three questions. When sincere aspirants endeavour to fathom these issues, they become overwhelmed, and their mind becomes quiet. Instead of probing further, they become eager to attain spiritual experience. It is not technicalities of religion but sincere practice of religious precepts that becomes important for them. It is people such as these who, once ordinary people, become great saints.

### Sri Ramakrishna—Avatara?

If one reads the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna, even casually, one is wonderstruck at the immensity of his character. One wonders who this man was. Even a semi-believer will begin to feel that perhaps he was not just a man, but God. And indeed, in his last days Sri Ramakrishna very emphatically told Naren—the future Swami Vivekananda—'He who was Rāma and Krishna is now, in this body, Ramakrishna' (72).

Before Sri Ramakrishna's birth, his father had a vivid dream of his Chosen Ideal, Sri Gadadhara, who told him, 'I shall be born as your son and be the object of your loving care.'<sup>3</sup> Mathuranath Biswas, one of the first great admirers of Sri Ramakrishna, saw, with open eyes, Sri Ramakrishna take the form of Lord Shiva and Mother Kali as he walked back and forth on the veranda to the northeast of his room (496). Great scholars like the Bhairavi Brahmani and Pandit Padmalochan recognized him as an Incarnation according to their knowledge of the scriptures.

Sri Ramakrishna was not shy about narrating his visions and experiences to his intimate disciples. The *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* is replete with his utterances about himself. To quote a few:

'The other day ... I saw Satchidānanda come out

of this sheath. It said, "I incarnate Myself in every age."<sup>4</sup>

'I feel that it is the Divine Mother Herself who dwells in this body and plays with the devotees' (831).

'There are two persons in this. One, the Divine Mother ... Yes, one is She. And the other is Her devotee. ... Alas! To whom shall I say all this? Who will understand me?' (943).

'Again, I see the body to be like a pumpkin with the seeds scooped out. ... The Indivisible Satchidānanda—I see It both inside and outside' (969).

Any one of these statements, taken alone, may not convince us that Sri Ramakrishna was an Incarnation, but when taken together, we begin to wonder whether it might be so. (*To be Concluded*)

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1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 1.370.
2. M, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 484.
3. Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1983), 37.
4. *Gospel*, 720.

**The greatness of Ramakrishna** lies in this that he could at once feel the dynamism of spirit not known to Kant, functioning through the psychic and cosmic forces. His sadhana consists in completely removing consciousness from the scaffoldings of vital and mental life and opening it to the supramental fineness and transcendental reaches. Ramakrishna discovers the natural gravitation of life to spirit. The beauty of mystic life lies in discovering the thread of connection that runs through the heart of existence. It becomes quite easy when this subtle thread of life is realized and its functioning definitely understood through all the grades of existence. ... It is this fine spiritual appeal that makes Sri Ramakrishna at once an attraction and a wonder. —Mahendranath Sircar

# The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna: Guidebook for Sadhana

Br. Sushantachaitanya

THE *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* occupies a unique place in the history of the hagiographic literature of the world. As Aldous Huxley puts it: ‘Never have the small events of a contemplative’s daily life been described with such a wealth of intimate detail. Never have the casual and unstudied utterances of a great religious teacher been set down with so minute a fidelity.’<sup>1</sup> Contrary to the style in other gospels, Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings are not presented in an impersonal manner divorced from his life, but emerge suffused with his personality. The dramatic mode of presentation adopted by Mahendranath Gupta, better known simply as ‘M’, makes the study of the *Gospel* not only an intellectual exercise but also a spiritual experience. It is not mere bookish knowledge but the Master’s own spiritual experiences that we get there. Every spiritual instruction that issues forth from his lips has been attested by his own life. The highest thoughts are expressed in everyday language using the most common expressions and homely parables, setting the *Gospel* apart from other theological and philosophical works. Moreover, the teachings found there remain positively relevant to us in this modern age. They offer practical solutions to the ills affecting the humanity of today as well as tomorrow. Finally, the *Gospel* is universal in its scope. A person belonging to any race, any religion, placed in any station of life, and with any qualification will receive something tangible from it.

The *Gospel* occupies a cherished place in the hearts of the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna. They believe that it contains the essence of all scriptures. The subject matter of the *Gospel* is God and God alone. It consists mainly of Sri Ramakrishna’s teach-

ings to a select group of sincere and devoted spiritual aspirants, given in the context of the Master’s daily life. It contains a vast wealth of teachings for sadhakas and practical wisdom valuable for both monks and householders. To arrive at a complete and comprehensive view of the Master on any subject, the *Gospel* alone is not sufficient; the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, found in his *Complete Works*, and Swami Saradananda’s biography, *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, must also be taken into account. Having said that, we admit that the *Gospel*, containing as it does the direct words of Sri Ramakrishna, is particularly treasured by devotees, and is an unfailing source of inspiration for sadhakas. In this article we survey some of the qualities required of a spiritual aspirant as discussed in the *Gospel*.

## Sadhaka and Sadhana

Sri Ramakrishna classifies human beings into four types: the bound, the struggling, the liberated, and the ever-free (249). Of these, the liberated and the ever-free are few and far between, and don’t require much, if any, spiritual instruction. The bound souls enmeshed in worldliness don’t feel the need for spiritual life at all. So it is for the struggling souls—those longing for liberation—that spiritual instructions are relevant, and it is to this class of people that they are addressed in the *Gospel*.

The object of sadhana is to realize God, one’s true Self, by establishing complete mastery over the mind and senses and gaining true purity of mind. Sri Ramakrishna says that one should learn the essence of the scriptures from the guru and then practise intense spiritual disciplines. ‘Can one obtain the vision of God all of a sudden, without any prep-

aration?’ he asks. ‘You want to eat butter. But what will you achieve by simply repeating that there is butter in milk? You have to work hard for it. Only thus can you separate butter from milk. Can one see God by merely repeating, “God exists”? One needs *sādhana*’ (608). With various similes does Sri Ramakrishna drive home the need for *sadhana*, such as the need for fish bait, and a rod and line, to catch fish, or the need to swallow ‘*siddhi*’ in order to become intoxicated (608, 524).

*Sadhana* does not mean merely studying the scriptures and knowing what they say. Sri Ramakrishna reminds us, ‘What will one gain by merely quoting or hearing the scriptures? One must assimilate them. The almanac makes a forecast of the rainfall for the year, but you won’t get a drop by squeezing its pages’ (524). And again, ‘What will a man gain by merely reasoning about the words of the scriptures? Ah, the fools! They reason themselves to death over information about the path. They never take the plunge. What a pity!’ (543).

He stresses intense self-effort at the beginning of spiritual life. It is like steering a boat through wind and waves or along the curves of the river; after the boat passes through them, everything becomes smooth (112). Still, however much *sadhana* we perform, nothing can be achieved without God’s grace or before the proper time (174, 809).

### **Bases of Spiritual Life**

Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes a number of fundamental virtues and practices, lacking which spiritual life is bound to fail. Cultivating these is itself spiritual practice. A closer look at some of these qualities and habits should serve as a useful reminder.

**Truthfulness** · God—who is Truth itself—cannot be attained without adhering to truth at all times in all respects. Truthfulness, according to the Master, is the *tapasya* for this age (749). ‘If a man clings tenaciously to truth he ultimately realizes God. Without this regard for truth, one gradually loses everything’ (312). He insists on strict adherence to truth for both householders and monks, and himself sets a perfect example. He would of-

ten say, ‘I gave up everything at Her feet but could not bring myself to give up truth’ (ibid.). Another dimension of truthfulness is to make one’s thought, word, and action tally with one another. ‘Be not a traitor to your thoughts,’ he says, ‘Be sincere; act according to your thoughts; and you shall surely succeed.’<sup>2</sup>

**Brahmacharya** · ‘To be able to realize God, one must practise absolute continence. ... A man controlling the seminal fluid develops a special power. He grows a new inner nerve called the nerve of memory. Through that nerve he remembers all, he understands all,’ says Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>3</sup> Again, he says, ‘As one’s face may be seen reflected in a sheet of glass coated with quicksilver, so the glorious image of the Almighty God can be seen reflected in the heart of a person who has preserved his power and purity through perfect continence.’<sup>4</sup>

**Faith in God** · Sri Ramakrishna teaches that the indispensable principle in unfolding one’s spiritual potential is faith: ‘God can be realized by true faith alone. And the realization is hastened if you believe everything about God. The cow that picks and chooses its food gives milk only in dribblets, but if she eats all kinds of plants, then her milk flows in torrents.’<sup>5</sup>

One significant event gives us insight into Sri Ramakrishna’s conception of faith: Narendranath once spoke disparagingly on ‘blind faith’ in his presence. The Master said, ‘Naren, what do you mean by “blind faith”? Faith is always blind. Has faith an “eye”? Why say “blind faith”? Either simply say “faith” or say “Jnana” [knowledge]. What do you mean by classifying faith—one kind having an eye, the other being blind?’<sup>6</sup>

‘Nothing whatsoever is achieved by the performance of worship, *japa*, and devotions, without faith,’<sup>7</sup> says Sri Ramakrishna. Furthermore, to acquire faith he prescribes *sadhu sanga*—the company of holy persons (503)—and a guileless mind (865). He uses various similes and examples to indicate the nature of the faith needed to realize God—childlike faith, the faith of Jadabharata or Vyasa, or the faith of Krishnakishore (248, 117). Moreover, faith must



not be lukewarm: 'One should have such burning faith in God that one can say: "What? I have repeated the name of God, and can sin still cling to me? How can I be a sinner any more? How can I be in bondage any more?"' (138).

**Faith in the Guru** · Faith in the guru is closely linked to faith in God. A guru is like a guide whose instructions one has to follow when going to an unknown land. Faith in the guru is inculcated through the understanding that he represents the Godhead. 'It is Satchidānanda that comes to us in the form of the guru,' says Sri Ramakrishna. 'The guru should be regarded as the direct manifestation of God. Only then can the disciple have faith in the mantra given by the guru. Once a man has faith he achieves all' (292). Moreover, the guru and the chosen deity are one: 'When the vision of the Ishta is about to take place, the guru appears before the aspirant and says to him, "Behold! There is your Ishta." Saying this, the guru merges in the Ishta. ... The guru is the thread that leads to God' (184).

In places, Sri Ramakrishna seems to subscribe to the doctrine of indiscriminate, uncritical, and absolute obedience to the guru. For instance, he says, 'A man should have faith in the words of his guru. He doesn't have to look into his character. "Though my guru visits the grog-shop, still he is the embodiment of Eternal Bliss"' (658). Addressing this criticism, Swami Tapasyananda points out that at many places in the *Gospel*, the Master insists on the guru's having a divine commission. Through his parable of the water-snake and the frog he warns that an incompetent guru only ruins himself and others. So the purport of the above statement 'is not to encourage indiscretions and abuses of guruism', but only to point out 'the exalted ideal of faith that spiritual aspirants of the highest order possess'.<sup>8</sup>

**Abhyasa** · 'One must practise spiritual discipline laboriously, in order to avoid the clutches of maya.'<sup>9</sup> Sri Ramakrishna insists on hard struggle in the beginning of spiritual life, and assures us that 'later on you will enjoy your pension' (210). To drive home the need for constant practice, he cites the example of an Englishwoman whom he saw stand-

ing on one leg on the back of a running horse, a feat she could only have mastered by constant practice (182). He also says that 'one must have stern determination; then alone is spiritual practice possible. One must make a firm resolve' (210); and prescribes 'abhyāsayoga, the yoga of practice', for controlling the mind. Genuine aspirants possess this determination. They are like hereditary farmers who will not give up their profession even if it has not rained for twelve years, or like anglers who will wait for hours to hook a big fish.

**Sincerity** · Sri Ramakrishna places great stress on sincerity. That God can be realized through any path, provided one is sincere, is his constant assertion. God himself will correct the errors in the path one has chosen, if one is sincere and earnest. 'Suppose a man has set out with a sincere desire to visit Jagannath at Puri and by mistake has gone north instead of south; then certainly someone meeting him on the way will tell him: "My good fellow, don't go that way. Go to the south." And the man will reach Jagannath sooner or later' (559). What is required is sincerity of purpose. He exhorts us not to waste time arguing about the real nature of God. 'If the devotee is sincere, then God, who is the Inner Guide of all, will certainly reveal to the devotee His true nature' (422).

**Self-control** · Sri Ramakrishna suggests a novel method for attaining mastery over the mind and senses. Passions like lust and anger are our enemies when directed towards worldly objects. He tells us: 'Anger and lust cannot be destroyed. Turn them toward God. If you must feel desire and temptation, then desire to realize God, feel tempted by Him' (162). And, 'Direct the six passions to God. ... Feel angry at those who stand in your way to God. Feel greedy for Him' (220). So the thirst for the things of the world should be changed into hankering for God; similarly must one transform all the passions. At the same time, he warns spiritual aspirants to stay aloof from all objects of temptation as far as possible.

**Swadhyaya** · To a superficial reader of the *Gospel* it may appear that Sri Ramakrishna is against

scriptural studies. We find him often repeating, ‘Of what avail is mere scholarship?’ or ‘Too much study of the scriptures does more harm than good,’ and so on (917, 255). But the Master’s real aim is different. He says, ‘The important thing is to know the essence of the scriptures’ (255); and, ‘In the scriptures you will find the way to realize God. But after getting all the information about the path, you must begin to work’ (729). He likens them to a letter from home: once the man has read it, he doesn’t need it anymore; he needs only to purchase the sweets and cloth requested in the letter. After grasping the essence of the scriptures, one should strive to realize God; else one will be like someone who, going to a mango-orchard, remains busy counting the trees, branches, and leaves, instead of eating mangoes.

He would encourage his disciples to read out to him from scriptural texts and would say that it is good to know their contents. That knowledge could fructify at some later time, if not immediately. As the fruit of *swadhyaya*, Sri Ramakrishna expects a person to be endowed with discrimination, renunciation, and love of God: ‘If I see a pundit without discrimination and love of God, I regard him as a bit of straw’ (889). Swami Tapasyananda concludes: ‘Thus it is the absence of Viveka and Vairagya in the scholar, together with his conceit, that the Master condemns, and not his scholarship.’<sup>10</sup>

**Viveka** · Discrimination is the main practice for aspirants following the path of jnana, but it has a fundamental place in the life of all spiritual seekers. Sri Ramakrishna too places a lot of emphasis on *viveka*. He defines *viveka* as sifting the real from the unreal: ‘You should always discriminate between the Real and the unreal. God alone is real, the Eternal Substance; all else is unreal, that is, impermanent. By discriminating thus, one should shake off impermanent objects from the mind.’<sup>11</sup> He gives practical tips on how to discriminate: ‘What does a man get with money? Food, clothes, and a dwelling-place—nothing more. You cannot realize God with its help. Therefore money can never be the goal of life. That is the process of discrimination. ... Consider—what is there in money or in a beautiful

body? Discriminate and you will find that even the body of a beautiful woman consists of bones, flesh, fat, and other disagreeable things. Why should a man give up God and direct his attention to such things? Why should a man forget God for their sake?’ (82). The process is clearly delineated in yet another way as follows: ‘You all know from your experience how impermanent the world is. Look at it this way. How many people have come into the world and again passed away! People are born and they die. This moment the world is and the next it is not. It is impermanent. Those you think to be your very own will not exist for you when you close your eyes in death’ (325). Thus discriminating, we arrive at God, who is the only eternal substance. *Viveka* keeps the spiritual aspirant on the right path, guiding him or her in what to do and not to do.

**Vairagya** · *Vairagya* is intense dispassion for the world and strong devotion towards God, and is the natural outcome of *viveka*. Through *vairagya* we give up our hankering for the things of the world and pursue the spiritual path earnestly. Sri Ramakrishna would narrate the story of the kite, one of the Avadhuta’s twenty-four gurus, to illustrate this principle. A kite snatched a fish, and was then chased by a thousand crows. The crows finally left the kite when it dropped the fish (314).

‘If you want to realize God, then you must cultivate intense dispassion,’ says Sri Ramakrishna. ‘You must renounce immediately what you feel to be standing in your way. You should not put it off till the future. “Woman and gold” is the obstruction. The mind must be withdrawn from it’ (750).

Sri Ramakrishna speaks also of renunciation of the ego: ‘Give up the “unripe ego”, the ego that creates attachment to “woman and gold”. The ego that makes a man feel he is God’s servant, His child, is the “ripe ego”. It doesn’t harm one’ (790).

These renunciations, according to Sri Ramakrishna, are the real and supreme renunciations, and not giving up such things as chewing betel-leaf, eating fish, or smoking (291). Also, by renunciation he doesn’t mean we are to give up everything and sit like a stone. He insists, ‘It will not do for the sad-

haka to renounce duties. He should perform his duties, such as worship, japa, meditation, prayer, and pilgrimage' (111).

*Vairagya* is of two types. Mild renunciation is a slow and procrastinating process; there is no knowing when it will mature. On the other hand, one with intense *vairagya* feels restless for God and seeks nothing but God. He or she regards the world as a deep well and relatives as venomous snakes, and has great inward resolution, like a farmer determined to bring water to his field (166). 'Markatavairāgya' or 'monkey renunciation' is something else—'It is a false renunciation stimulated by the afflictions of the world ... [and] doesn't last long' (502).

*Yearning* · Nothing whatsoever is achieved in spiritual life without yearning for God. It is the root of all spiritual endeavours. Intense yearning is 'like the red sky in the east at dawn. After such a sky the sun must rise. Immediately after that yearning one sees God' (338). What kind of yearning is needed? 'One must have for God the yearning of a child. ... He to whom the enjoyment of worldly happiness appears tasteless, he who takes no delight in anything of the world—money, name, creature comforts, sense pleasure—becomes sincerely grief-stricken for the vision of the Mother. And to him alone the Mother comes running, leaving all Her other duties' (673).

Sri Ramakrishna goes so far as to say that the path followed is immaterial; even a wrong path will get corrected and take us to the goal. 'The vital thing is restlessness' (ibid.). God is our inner guide, and will lead us along the right path. 'The point is, to love God even as the mother loves her child, the chaste wife her husband, and the worldly man his wealth. Add together these three forces of love, these three powers of attraction, and give it all to God. Then you will certainly see Him' (83). Again, he gives the example of the guru who pushes the disciple under water for a while. The disciple 'was dying for a breath of air' (937); in the same way must one long for God.

*Alertness* · Living continuously in the midst of objects of desire dulls an aspirant's spiritual alertness. Sri Ramakrishna warns: 'He thinks all

is well with him.' But he is like a scavenger who, in course of time, loses all repulsion for the night-soil he carries (131). While going along a gradually downward-sloping path, one doesn't realize how far down one has come (247). So it is in spiritual life. Without alertness a sadhaka will lose all his or her hard-earned spirituality. A sadhu 'should be very alert about spiritual things. The snake is very sensitive in its tail. Its whole body reacts when it is hurt there. Similarly, the whole life of a sādhu is affected when his spirituality is touched' (440). One should always keep the ideal shining bright within, in the midst of one's various occupations, like a woman flattening paddy with a husking machine who, while carrying out various tasks simultaneously, is ever mindful that her hand is not crushed by the pestle (367). To achieve this, constant introspection is necessary.

## Conclusion

Sri Ramakrishna's parables and stories make the spiritual truths they illustrate easy to grasp; thus they enter deep within our minds and serve as fail-safe guidance for our spiritual life. And once having learned from his teachings what is to be done, may we have the conviction and determination to carry that out!



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# The Many-splendoured Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta – V

Dr M Sivaramkrishna

## Music and the Master

THE songs in the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* are perennial sources of delight. Music and the Master are inseparable. Sometimes he himself sings with ecstatic fervour; at other times others sing and he experiences the same ecstasy. The text of the songs and the context get attuned, almost magically. *We* are enchanted too, and are transported into a world of radiant joy.

This provides the context for the first part of this instalment. In a local book store, I saw a beautifully produced volume—so well designed that it instantly attracted my attention. It was *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West: Bhairavi* by Peter Lavezzoli. It carries a foreword by Ravi Shankar. My curiosity was roused, and I felt that there *must* be some reference to our music-intoxicated Great Master. My hunch was correct.

But first, some details about the contents of the book. The book describes the advent and consequent impact of Indian music—instrumental music especially—on the West. Ali Akbar Khan ‘issued an LP called *Music of India, Morning and Evening Ragas* with spoken introductions by Western classical violinist Yehudi Menuhin. Until then, Indian classical music was terra incognita in the West. When the same album was reissued as a compact disc in 1995, under the title *Then and Now*, it was nominated for a Grammy.<sup>1</sup> All this was a preamble, says the blurb, to ‘the explosive influence of Indian music and culture in the West.’

As Ravi Shankar says in his foreword to the book, ‘It is amazing to see the dedication and amount of hard work Peter Lavezzoli has gone through in creating this book. He has put hours, months and years into meeting and interviewing

so many musicians—Indians and Westerners as well.’ The musicians interviewed for the book include Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, Mickey Hart, Zakir Hussain, Philip Glass, David Crosby, Roger McLaughlin, Zubin Mehta, Terry Riley, Bill Laswell, and John MacLaughlin. In this sumptuous book of four hundred and fifty-six pages, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda figure in several contexts. In the course of his interview with Lavezzoli, ‘*Swara Samrat*’ Ali Akbar Khan tells about his father ‘who without music, couldn’t live for a second!’ His apprenticeship in music had been interrupted, but after a period of intense turmoil he continued learning music. He relates: ‘[My father’s guru] had known Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of Ramakrishna. And Vivekananda’s elder [cousin] brother Habu [Amritlal] Dutta, had learned all kinds of Western music. He had his own orchestra, and played many different instruments. He met my father and accepted him as a student, so my father began learning music from him, including Western music.’ Indeed, it was Swamiji’s brother ‘who started him off’ (71).

If the Great Master and Swamiji had an indirect impact on Ali Akbar Khan’s father, their influence is perceivable on the son too. Lavezzoli observes that ‘after discussing his father’s life in the interview ... Khan compares his own teaching style with that of his father and discusses the concept of *Nada Brahma*, where sound is the primary creative force of the universe. ... Music is the highest form of spiritual practice, as it involves the conscious creation of sound, the most powerful medium known to man. Khan reiterates his father’s teaching that the ultimate aim of the musician is not to develop tech-

nical mastery, but a pure and tender heart' (70). Isn't it teleologically appropriate that the Master and his disciple who were harbingers of the dawn of Indian spirituality in the West should figure in the dawn of its music too? Indeed, both were singers celestial of the perennial music of the Spirit that crosses all barriers.

The next context concerns John Coltrane, tenor and soprano saxophonist who died of cancer at the young age of forty. Lavezzoli says, 'More than any other American musician, Coltrane introduced an entire generation of jazz, rock, and 20th-century classical musicians to the transcendent power of Indian music and spirituality.' He was, in short, 'one of the father figures of a musical and spiritual movement' (7). It is, therefore, only natural that one important influence on him was Sri Ramakrishna. His quest for transcendence took a definitive turn with his investigation of non-Western music, but soon developed into an increasingly insistent urge for discovering 'a universalist position'. So 'Coltrane began studying the teachings of Hinduism and Islam, reading translations of the Qur'an, Ramakrishna, and Yogananda's classic *Autobiography of a Yogi*. ... But Coltrane resolved to make music his spiritual practice, and said, "My goal is to live the truly religious life and express it through my music"' (273). Indeed, Ravi Shankar points out that Coltrane came out of his 'drug trips' and 'when [he] came to me, he looked different from his contemporaries: so clean, well-mannered and humble. He had ... become a vegetarian and taken to reading Ramakrishna's books' (280). And Lavezzoli himself notes that he was 'certainly intrigued with Indian spirituality as much as Indian music, if not more so. When he was not practicing his instrument, he was a voracious reader and his library included *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and the Bhagavad Gita' (280).

Reading of this music-spirituality blend bringing the East and the West together in its own way, I recalled a song in the *Gospel* which Swamiji (then Narendra) sang on Saturday, 7 May 1887:

I salute the Eternal Teacher, who is the  
Embodiment of the Bliss of Brahman,  
The Essence of knowledge and liberation,  
the Giver of Supreme Joy;  
Who is all-pervading like the ākāśa, and is the  
goal of the Vedānta's teachings;  
Who is One, eternal, stainless, pure, and is the  
constant Witness of all things;  
Who dwells beyond all moods, transcending the  
three gunas.<sup>2</sup>

When one looks at the instances of the Great Master's figuring in the world of the 'music of the spheres'—neither Eastern nor Western—one feels convinced of the prophetic Truth that underlies the salutations offered by Swamiji in the above song. The Prophet of the New Age should indeed underscore the ethos of the New Age music, and he does.

### **The West-East Encounter**

Speaking of spiritual influences, I would like to note instances of Sri Ramakrishna's impact on Western sadhus and sannyasins who came and settled down in India to pursue their spiritual quest. We have an important record of these Western sadhus in Marcus Allsop's fascinating book *Western Sadhus and Sannyasins in India*.<sup>3</sup> This provides revealing insights into several aspects of India's spirituality vis-à-vis the 'Western psyche'. Allsop is 'a long-time student of Indian spirituality. Educated in fine art at Newcastle College of Arts and Technology, he is currently studying Eastern iconographic painting' and 'lives in London', says the blurb.

In his introduction, Allsop observes: 'The term *Hinduism* is a label given by foreigners to India's wide practices of religion. A more correct term is *sanatana dharma*—the eternal path.' And 'this eternal path is an accepted primeval way of living in harmony with cosmic forces.' Pointing out that the Vedas contain 'the dharmic roots', he says that they 'clearly state that the one truth reveals itself in the form of many deities' (xvii). It is in this context that Allsop refers to the Great Master:

Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), one of modern India's most highly revered sages, attested to this particular revelation. Ramakrishna explored the sadhanas of the various world religions, abandoning himself to the intense and exclusive practices of each one for an indefinite period. He included both Christianity and Islam in his exploration.

And,

When he took initiation into one path, he completely dropped the beliefs of the others. Time and again he was blessed with the rarest, spectacular visions and visitations from God in the form of Siva, Krishna, Jesus, or whichever divinity he was engaged in worshipping. Time and time again these fantastic and beautiful presences would dissolve into that one primordial light, which is pure and absolute love (xvii–xviii).

These remarks reveal an inner sensitivity as against mere cerebral, academic rhetoric. No wonder that in these interviews with Western sadhus, there is manifest authenticity in their responses. Swami Devananda Saraswati (a Canadian by birth) was in quest of 'a religion that is natural to the cosmos, natural to the cosmic order'. And 'this personified' 'is available' to him 'as the Mother Goddess'. This was his temperament when he came across the *Gospel*: 'Reading *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, it was unbelievable to me that such beings were available in this age and that it was possible to contact these individuals' (16). This set him off in a direction which brought him to his own guru.

Then there is Swami Vijayananda, who says that 'despite a very religious childhood, I became an atheist as I grew up. Nonetheless, I was impressed when I read Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga*, his first book on Yoga' (69). A doctor by profession in a small town in France, Vijayananda ultimately became a disciple of Anandamayee Ma.

One thing which is worthy of note is that many of these Western sadhus express undoubted dissatisfaction with their own ethos. Nani Ma, for instance, says that 'like many people, I was fairly fed up with the West and society at that time and was looking for something more uplifting' (131).

Therefore, it is all the more surprising that they are able to 'fuse', as it were, many experiences of Indian saints and sages with their own cultural notions. A good example is Rajasekhara Dasa Brahmachari's visit to the Banke Bihari temple in Vrindavan vis-à-vis Sri Ramakrishna's experiences there.

Rajasekhara Dasa Brahmachari points out that 'Banke Bihari temple is approached through a series of busy narrow lanes packed with stalls that sell every kind of article imaginable for the worship of deities' (142). He also recalls the Great Master's visit there: 'The atmosphere is lush and ripe—full of association and desire for Krishna's *darshan*. It was in this place that Sri Ramakrishna went into samadhi at the sight of the idol' (143). For the Great Master, it was, obviously, no idol, but a vibrant living centre of consciousness. Indeed, such places and pilgrim centres get sanctified when the Great Master visits them. As Rajasekhara Dasa notes in another context:

Many celebrated masters have spent time in Vrindavan. Sri Ramakrishna loved it so much that he could not bear to leave and only did so after taking a handful of earth and a cutting from a creeper so he could create his own Vrindavan at Dakshineswar, just outside of Calcutta where he generally resided (150).

We are all familiar with the way in which Vrindavan impressed Sri Ramakrishna. That contemporary Western sadhus cite Sri Ramakrishna as the glorious exemplar and embodiment of the live spiritual ambience of, in this case, Vrindavan, shows how in the Great Master the presence of the past is a continuum, not a rift in the canvas of temporality. Nani Ma herself testifies to this:

The living presence of these great masters is exceptionally palpable in their respective shrines; the pujas held every evening are most evocative. Sitting in front of the *murti* of Sri Ramakrishna I felt I was sitting in the graceful company of the guru, being showered with his blessing. The definite spiritual empowerment of statues and the transmission of grace radiated by them is one of the real wonders of the Indian spiritual tradition (152).

Obviously, the Ramakrishna-Vedanta tradition has emerged as an unfailing, most reliable frame of reference for the Indian spiritual tradition in its encounter with genuine Western seekers. 'Genuine' because, as the author Marcus Allsop rightly says, 'their commitment to *sadhana* uniquely distinguished them [the genuine seekers] from those who had an appreciation for a simple life of wandering, centred on few responsibilities and ganja smoking in an exotic environment' (194).

### Travelling to Russia

Another piece of information concerns Swamiji. In the recent and, in many ways, most definitive study of P D Ouspensky by Gary Lachman there are several references to Swamiji.<sup>4</sup> Ouspensky, follower of the enigmatic and esoteric Gurdjieff, was famous for his many books, especially *In Search of the Miraculous*. His life written by Gary Lachman is described by Colin Wilson as 'the classic book on Ouspensky we've all been waiting for'. Titled *In Search of P.D. Ouspensky: The Genius in the Shadow of Gurdjieff*, the book is a meticulous and comprehensive account which unearths many unknown details.

Swamiji finds mention in the context of a close associate of Ouspensky's, Anna Butkovsky (later Hewitt). Anna, we are told, 'nursed a mystical hunger since the age of nine' (67). Her encounter with Ouspensky led to many crucial stages in her interest in the occult, mysticism, and other related areas. Swamiji is referred to in the course of one of the everyday meetings:

[The] talk always centered around the same subject: how they could find a teacher who could lead them to the 'Miracle'. The Miracle was super-consciousness—*sverkhsoznanie*, a term popularized by the writer M. V. Lodizhensky. Everything they spoke of—the fourth dimension, Wagner, the Holy Grail, Vivekananda, alchemy, yoga, Nietzsche, magic, samadhi, and the rest—led back to the necessity of transforming consciousness (69).

Two important entities which have always intrigued the West appear here. The first involves

various aspects of creativity and consciousness. The list includes philosophy (Nietzsche), myth (Holy Grail), magic and alchemy—perhaps a heightened form of magic, music (Wagner); and in this spectrum appear Swamiji, yoga, and samadhi. The second point is about the need for a teacher—a very complex issue. This is, as it were, a bone of contention for the West. In short, transformation of consciousness continues to provoke and nag the Western hemisphere.

Ouspensky invited Anna to see his books. 'Aware that more than a love of deep reading was involved, Anna nevertheless agreed.' She 'glanced through the titles and selected three to take home. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, Hinton's *The Fourth Dimension*, and a volume on yoga by Vivekananda. Ouspensky told her that if Vivekananda's books were translated into Russian, they would certainly sell.' And what happened next is revelatory:

Anna took his remark to heart and got in touch with a friend, Nina Souvorina, niece of the publisher Alexei Souvorin, who had published Ouspensky's book on the Tarot ... and his short work on yoga ... both of which were later included in *A New Model of the Universe*. Souvorin combined editorial brilliance with an unbalanced personality. He did have a good sense of what would sell, though, and his editions of Vivekananda's works, with their bright purple covers and yellow lettering, became very popular (71).

Strange, indeed, is this story: a person who is unbalanced but has an eye for the market becomes an instrument for introducing Swamiji to the West. The route is also interesting: Ouspensky asks Anna to look at books; she picks up one of Swamiji's yoga books; and finally Souvorin steps in. No details are available in Lachman's book about Souvorin's volumes. But the fact that Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Vedanta is firmly rooted in Moscow now could be, in a sense, the culmination of efforts by people like Souvorin in introducing it to the Russians. Mysterious and miraculous are the ways of the Great Master and his illustrious disciple!



(Continued on page 171)

# The 'Twelfth Student' at Thousand Island Park

Asim Chaudhuri

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA spent seven weeks in the summer of 1895 at Thousand Island Park, a village on Wellesly Island—one of the largest of the 'thousand islands' of the St Lawrence River at the outflow of Lake Ontario—with an intimate group of students and disciples. It is largely thanks to Sarah Ellen Waldo that we know what transpired there: her prodigious notes became the basis of the book *Inspired Talks*. According to Miss Waldo, there had been altogether twelve students who listened to Swamiji's discourses during that period, though all of them were not present at the same time. Until recently, only eleven had been accounted for.

Swamiji was invited to Thousand Island Park by Miss Mary Elizabeth Dutcher, one of his students in New York City, who owned a cottage a half mile from the dock on the wooded and hilly edge of the village. The idea was to assemble a few serious students from his classes in New York City who were completely earnest in their practice of spiritual disciplines, and let them experience his lofty flights of spiritual eloquence and words of profound wisdom without any interruption for a prolonged period. It was probably her Methodist faith that prompted Miss Dutcher to acquire some land at Thousand Island Park and build a cottage there in 1885. The cottage, surrounded by massive boulders, had a clear view of the river. In anticipation of Swamiji's visit, she added an entire wing to the cottage in early 1895. This wing, a three-storey addition, had his own room set apart on the top floor; the room had a private outside staircase for him to go in and out unnoticed. The room under that, on the second floor, was used as his classroom. Swamiji's room opened to a porch on the west side where he could

also talk to a group of people. A banner announcing 'WELCOME VIVEKANANDA' greeted Swamiji as he reached the cottage on 18 June. The 'Garden of Great Spirit'—that is what the American Indians called Thousand Island Park—now had another 'Great Spirit' in its midst, very much alive.

Swamiji had written to Mrs Bull on 25 April from New York, 'I want to manufacture a few "Yogis" out of the materials of the classes [in New York City].'<sup>1</sup> The advance party, consisting of Miss Dutcher and few others, welcomed him to what was to be his home for the next seven weeks. Miss Dutcher and her party could not, in their wildest dreams, have foreseen the nonpareil spiritual bonanza they would be savouring for the next few weeks. Indeed, they wondered, 'What have we ever done to deserve this?'<sup>2</sup>

Swamiji's teaching was divided more or less into three parts, with a subtle thread of continuity running through it. The first part ran from 19 June to 5 July. Since the students were all Christians, he started with the Christian scriptures, and sprinkled some concepts from the *Narada Bhakti Sutra* in between while discussing the concept of 'love of God'. He covered specifically the Gospel of John, then the Bhagavadgita, and talked about Sri Ramakrishna and the Divine Mother. During the second part, which lasted from 6 through 19 July, he taught mostly on the commentaries of Shankaracharya and Ramanuja on the *Brahma Sutra*, including his own views on them. From 20 July through 6 August, he spoke on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, the Upanishads, the Gita, and finally the *Avadhuta Gita*. The thread that ran through all the pearls of wisdom Swamiji cast during those seven glorious weeks was the concept: 'I and Thou are one and the same'.





*Thousand Island Park seen from space;  
the arrow marks Miss Dutcher's Cottage*

The impact of Swamiji's teachings, understandably, shook the 'devout Methodist' Miss Dutcher's tree of core belief so hard that she could bear no more. At times, she would stay away from the class for a few days to regain her footing. 'The most violent attack,' Swami Nikhilananda writes, 'came one day after a timid protest on her part against something he [Swamiji] had told them in the class. "The idea of duty is the midday sun of misery, scorching the very soul," he had said. "Is it not our duty—" she had begun, but got no farther. For once the great free soul broke all bounds in his rebellion against the idea that anyone should dare bind with fetters the soul of man. Miss Dutcher was not seen for some days.'<sup>3</sup> That happened on 13 July; the date is significant, as we shall see.<sup>4</sup>

However, if there were twelve students there at one time or another during the seven weeks, we have so far known the identities of only eleven. There were Mary Elizabeth Dutcher, the hostess; Sarah Ellen Waldo, the self-appointed scribe; Ruth Ellis, a newspaper staffer who was a friend of both Mrs Ole Bull and Miss Waldo, and who was helping out with Swamiji's classes in New York City; Dr L L Wight, a close friend of Misses Waldo and Ellis who seemed to have been 'stunned' by Swamiji's teachings in his New York classes; a one-time actress named Stella Campbell, probably the only misfit in the group, who thought spirituality could restore her beauty and youth; Walter and Frances

Goodyear, who had provided Swamiji with some practical help during the spring of 1895 in New York City (Walter Goodyear would later become an officer of the New York Vedanta Society); Mme Marie Louise, a Frenchwoman with a rather masculine appearance who, on 7 July, received from Swamiji the vows of sannyasa and the name Abhayananda; Leon Landsberg, whom the forgiving and compassionate Swamiji also initiated into sannyasa, giving him the name Kripananda; Christina Greenstidel, who had met Swamiji in Detroit in 1894 and later became known as Sister Christine; and Mrs Mary Funke, also from Detroit and a friend of Greenstidel's.

The identity of the twelfth person has so far been shrouded in mystery. The earliest information regarding the total number of students is found in an article by Miss Waldo in *Prabuddha Bharata* of 1906: 'About the middle of June six or eight students gathered in the little house at Thousand Island Park and true to his promise, Swami Vivekananda came there on the 20th [actually 18th] of the month and remained for seven blessed weeks. A few more students joined us, until we numbered twelve, including our hostess,' she writes.<sup>5</sup> This article is probably the most authentic source of information we have about the number of students present. Later in the same article she writes, 'It was purely a coincidence that there were just twelve of us'; she was almost certainly alluding to the twelve disciples of Jesus Christ. In a letter written to Mrs Bull on 9 August 1895—when her memory of those seven weeks that ended on 6 August would still have been fresh—Ruth Ellis wrote, 'Our family at Miss Dutcher's cottage was never smaller than eight, and sometimes we had ten or even twelve persons.'<sup>6</sup> Ruth Ellis's 'family' of twelve persons 'sometimes' does not quite tally with Miss Waldo's statement in her introduction to *Inspired Talks*: 'All the twelve were not together at once, ten being the largest number present at any one time.'<sup>7</sup> Miss Waldo's comment strikes me as being more accurate.



*Vivekananda Cottage, Thousand Island Park*

Mrs Funke wrote to a friend from Thousand Island Park in June of 1895: 'I especially like Miss Waldo and Miss Ellis, although the whole household is interesting. Some unique characters. One, a Dr Wright of Cambridge, a very cultured man, creates much merriment at times.'<sup>8</sup> Was the twelfth person Prof. John Henry Wright of Cambridge? I don't think so; Mrs Funke seems to have confused Dr Wight with Dr Wright. Swamiji would have never addressed Dr John Henry Wright as 'Docky'.

Things get more complicated. The discovery of a second set of notes on Swamiji's discourses at Thousand Island Park has reinforced the assumption, in some people's minds, of a twelfth student being present, at least from 2 to 10 or possibly 12 July. These forty-nine pages of notes, covering 2 July through 6 August, were with Josephine MacLeod until her death. The notes were copied by somebody who, according to Miss MacLeod, was not at Thousand Island Park, 'from an original set of notes made during Swamiji's talks by a new student not very familiar with Vedantic terminology.'<sup>9</sup> The first eighteen pages of Miss MacLeod's notes, covering 2 to 10 July, were definitely taken by somebody other than Miss Waldo. The next thirty-one pages, covering 11 July to 6 August, are very similar to Miss Waldo's notes, and could have been copied from hers (*ibid.*). Who, then, was the person taking notes between 2 and 10 (or 12) July? Marie Louise Burke suggests: 'Let us assume, then, that our note taker was the Unidentified Student [the twelfth student].

We find that he or she struggled manfully up to July 10. From then to the last class on August 6 the notes are almost (but not entirely) identical with Miss Waldo's, as we know the latter from *Inspired Talks*.<sup>10</sup> That difference could have been the result of subsequent editing. Swami Atmaghanananda, who was at one time connected with the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York City, wrote, 'As to the original note-taker's identity, none of the list of known disciples [the eleven mentioned earlier] who were present satisfies the necessary condition, except possibly the hostess, Miss Dutcher herself.'<sup>11</sup>

I will accept the swami's hypothesis, especially in light of this observation: 'Though the last entry of the first section is dated July 10, there are in it some quotations from the two days following (as ascertained by comparing them with *Inspired Talks*), and the dated entries for July 11 and 12 from the second section contain as well several variants worth noting' (194). This may mean that the original note-taker took notes up to 12 July, although not very efficiently for the last two days, and then stopped and copied from Sarah Waldo's notes from 13 July onwards. Recall what happened to Miss Dutcher on July 13! Pressure had probably been building up inside her since the 11th, which affected her concentration and hampered her note-taking ability for the next two days. Finally, on the 13th, her trepidation reached its peak, and she absconded for the next few days. When she returned to the class, she did not continue taking her own notes, copying Miss Waldo's instead, at that point of time or later. Make sense?

Swami Atmaghananada's hypothesis was based on 'the list of known disciples', eleven to be exact. But we know from two very reliable sources, Sarah Ellen Waldo and Ruth Ellis, that there were twelve. Could both of them be wrong? If not, who was the twelfth person? The *Evening Herald* of Syracuse, New York, carried a full-page report, 'Where Syracusans Recreate', on 30 June 1895, containing the following revealing paragraph:

Stopping for a time at the well-known cottage of Miss E. H. Dutcher at Thousand Island Park are Mr. and Mrs. Walter Goodyear, Miss Ethel Howe, Miss Stella Campbell of New York city, Miss Ellen Waldo of Brooklyn, also the Swami Vivekananda of India. The latter was a delegate at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and one of the most popular of the many learned men from the far East. After the close of the Parliament the Swami remained in this country lecturing through the West [Midwest] and later in the East. He is an able exponent of Hindoo philosophy and has attracted many to listen to his teachings.

Bingo! Ethel E Howe, who had been a member of the New York City Vedanta group, was the 'Unidentified Student', the mysterious twelfth person. According to this report, which is dated 29 June, there were seven people in the cottage then, including Miss Dutcher and Swamiji. In his letter to Betty Sturges, written sometime in early July, Swamiji wrote, 'We are having great times here. Marie Louise arrived yesterday. So we are exactly seven now including all that have come yet.'<sup>12</sup> There is another discrepancy here. 'All that have come yet' should total eight after Marie Louise's arrival, if the newspaper report is correct and we assume that he included himself in the count. It is possible that he did not include Miss Dutcher in the count; she did not really 'come', as she was already there in her own house. On the other hand, Ethel Howe could have left before Marie Louise arrived and, therefore, was not included in his count, assuming that he did include Mary Dutcher. However, the expression 'we are exactly seven now including all that have come yet' precludes any prior departure. Regardless of whether Ethel Howe was there or not after Marie Louise's arrival, I think Swami Atmaghanananda was right: the date issue points to Miss Dutcher being the 'unidentified note-taker', taking fairly good notes between 2 and 10 July and not-so-good notes on 11 and 12 July. Unbeknownst to the *Evening Herald* reporter, he has solved for us the 'Mystery of the Twelfth Student at Thousand Island Park'.

Ethel Howe could not have stayed there for



*The room in which Swami Vivekananda stayed, now a shrine*

very long, because none of the published letters or reminiscences by either Swamiji or the students mention her name; the 'twelfth student' had thus remained 'unidentified' for all these years. Christina Greenstidel and Mary Funke were late arrivals, and may not have seen her, but how Ethel Howe's name could escape Miss Waldo's memory still remains a mystery.

Was Swamiji able to 'manufacture a few yogis' at the Thousand Islands? He surely did. Christina Greenstidel went on to become Sister Christine, one of his greatest American disciples. Sarah Ellen Waldo, his amanuensis, became a true karma yogi, capturing his words for posterity and teaching Vedanta. Swamiji devotees will be forever grateful to her for that; even he was amazed at her ability to catch his thoughts and words so perfectly. He transformed Leon Landsberg and Marie Louise into Swamis Kripananda and Abhayananda, respectively, and they served the cause of Vedanta in America (and India, in Abhayananda's case) until they turned away from Swamiji. Mary Caroline Funke, whom he dissuaded from becoming a brahmacharini, and of whom he said, 'She gives me freedom,' hung on to her memories of those 'blessed, halcyon days at Thousand Island Park,' especially the walk and meditation with Swamiji on the last day, as long as she lived. That itself qualifies her as a yogi. 'There is a young lady, Miss Campbell, Orchard Lake, Orchard Island, Michigan, who is a great worshipper of Krishna and lives alone in that Island, fasting and praying. She will give anything to be able to see India once, but she is awfully poor. If you bring her with you, I will anyhow

manage to pay her expenses,' Swamiji would write to Josephine MacLeod in July 1897 (8.409). How can we not consider this woman a yogi? We do not know much about the remaining six, although we know Dr Wight, Ethel Howe, Ruth Ellis, and the Goodyears continued as active members of the Vedanta Society of New York. The enormous spiritual thrust they received at Thousand Island Park must have had a tremendous, transforming effect on their lives too. They must have been yogis, in their own ways, as well. Very little is known about Mary Dutcher after that summer of 1895; she probably went back to Rochester.

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11. *Vedanta Kesari*, 50.193.
12. *Complete Works*, 5.88.

Next Monday we shall have a policeman of the Park. He is a very large, strong man, accustomed to the business. The sewers on the Park have been much improved and their mouths extended far out into the river, where the current carries off the refuse. Miss A. S. from Boston has been spending a few days at their cottage.

Stopping for a time at the well-known cottage of Miss E.H. Dutcher at Thousand Island Park are Mr. and Mrs. Walter Goodyear, Miss Ethel Howe, Miss Stella Campbell of New York City, Miss Ellen Waldo of Brooklyn, also the Swami Vivekananda of India. The latter was a delegate at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, and one of the most popular of the many learned men from the far East. After the close of the Parliament the Swami remained in this country lecturing through the West and later in the East. He is an able exponent of Hindoo philosophy and has attracted many to listen to his teachings.

The steamer Corsican of the Rome, Watertown & Ogdensburg line and the new Island Wanderer had a race down the river from S. Lawrence Park last Wednesday. The Wanderer was too much for the oil Corsican. She had her considerably to stern when she got to the Bay.

M. S. Howdle and his daughter of Skaneateles, who have attained considerable note as scenic artists, are on the river this season making sketches and working up subjects which they will put on sale another season. They will have a few completed pictures for sale and will display them at different points on the river. Their work is popular in all the different resorts they have ever visited, and it will no doubt be here.

During the winter some person or persons gained access to the rear of the boat livery, took off a couple of boards, went into one of the stalls and ransacked the whole livery. When the livery was opened this was discovered.

Last Sunday evidently the same parties entered again by the same way. Mr. Huxford left about 8 A. M. and returned from his house on Murray Hill Park about 8 P. M. This time the thieves seemed to find more than they wanted. They broke open his trunk and overhauled it, took his watch from his vest pocket and made their escape by the rear, as they entered. It was all done during the day.

A column from the Syracuse Evening Herald of 30 June 1895 carrying news about Swami Vivekananda

(Continued from page 166)

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# Mother Tripureshwari: The Matrix of Synthesis

Swami Sanmatrananda

## Mother, Divine Mother, Motherland

**N**O child attempts to measure the depths of its mother's heart. The mother's love and affection showered unasked-for satisfy the child. Yet, as one matures in body and mind, somewhere deep within one's consciousness, one becomes aware of an impenetrable mystery that envelops a mother's being. This gives rise to that awe-inspiring sentiment that has prompted humanity to worship the earthly mother as divine from time immemorial.

Again, when humans attempted for the first time to grasp the unfathomable reality underpinning the universe, they found words and thoughts recoiling. Frustrated in their attempts to lift the veil covering the face of Truth, they decided to offer their salutations instead to the ungraspable Absolute; and for this they had to imagine suitable forms and relations of adoration. In so doing they discovered that there could hardly be a better image of God than the image of the mother—the source of love, compassion, and peace.

Every evolution presupposes an involution. The power to create is suffused with the power to destroy. Thus, the Divine Mother holds the power not only to create, but also to destroy. This dual

*The Tripureshwari Temple, Agartala*

nature of the Mother again bewildered humans: they found the entire life process to be an inseparable interplay of life and death, light and shade, the benign and the terrible.

Life springs from the earth and to the earth it returns. Therefore, in ancient times the profound sentiments felt for one's own earthly mother were spontaneously transferred to mother earth. A partial reflection of this vision is seen in the adoration of one's own motherland that evolved in later times. Long before the rise of nationalism in India, in the period of the Puranas and the Tantras, several spiritually and culturally connected spots were believed to be hallowed by the presence of the Divine Mother. These are fifty-one in number and are called *pīṭha-sthānas* of the Devi, the Mother Divine. Matabari of Udaipur, Tripura, is one such *pīṭha-sthāna*.

This brief historical, mythological, and architectural study of this hallowed seat of spirituality, Matabari, attempts to throw light upon this dual aspect—benign and terrible—of Mother Tripureshwari. In so doing we find her to be the matrix that holds opposites together, thereby serving as the support of cultural and religious synthesis.

### **The Historical Perspective**

The history of Matabari is inextricably linked with the history of Tripura, as Udaipur was the capital of the state for at least a thousand years. The *Rajamala*, compiled under the patronage of Dharmamanikya I (1431–62 CE) is one of the most important textual sources for reconstructing Tripura's history. In this text the ancient name of Udaipur is given as Rangamati. Long ago, kings belonging to the Buddhist Mog community ruled here. In the 6th century CE, Yujhar Fa defeated the Mogs and captured Udaipur. Much later, Ratna Fa (1464–88) defeated his brothers and ascended the throne, assuming the royal title Manikya and thus founding the Manikya dynasty. He was the first prominent king to mint coins that have survived to this day. In 1567, Rangamati's name was changed to Udaipur after the then king Udaimanikya.

The Mogs used to consider the spot where the Tripureshwari temple stands today to be sacred. But they had to leave Rangamati on being defeated by Yujhar Fa. In 1501, King Dhanyamanikya built the present temple and dedicated it to Mother Tripureshwari. According to the *Rajamala*, Dhanyamanikya had wished to dedicate the temple to Vishnu. But he received instructions in a dream from the Divine Mother to bring her image from Chittagong where she was being worshipped by the Mogs under a certain tree. Dhanyamanikya followed this instruction and brought the Devi's image from Chittagong, enshrining her in the temple. Ever since, the Tripureshwari temple has remained associated with the rise and fall of the Manikya dynasty. In the 16th century, King Amarmanikya (who figures in Tagore's drama *Mukut*) was defeated at the hands of invaders from Arakan in the battle of Chittagong. The temple tower was slightly damaged in this conflict. In 1623, when Yashodharmanikya refused to send taxes to the Mughal emperor Jahangir, Tripura had to face a fierce Mughal invasion. Yashodharmanikya was defeated. Udaipur went into the hands of the Mughals for three years. The Mughals plundered the township but were forced to leave the place when a terrible

famine broke out. Later, Kalyanmanikya (1626–60) repaired the temple, as did Ramamanikya in 1681.

At the end of the reign of Vijaymanikya II (1746–51), Shamsher Gazi, a Muslim subject of Meherkul (Kumilla), raised a violent rebellion and attacked Udaipur. According to legend, after seven days of bloody battle, Shamsher received instructions from Mother Tripurasundari to please her by worshipping her divine form.

Only thus, the Devi prophesied, could Shamsher succeed. Shamsher worshipped the Devi accordingly and captured the capital. The prince Krishnamanikya, in spite of several attempts, was unable to defeat Shamsher and finally shifted his capital to old Agartala. Although Shamsher Gazi's career came to a sad end following intervention by Mir Kasim—the then Nawab of Bengal, with whom Krishnamanikya had taken refuge—the capital of Tripura never returned to Udaipur after this time.

According to some historians, there was a temple at the site of the present Tripureshwari even before Dhanyamanikya's reign. The temple was then used as a fortress. It had only one door, and its walls, just as today, were very thick. Even now, two peepholes, as in fortresses, are seen in the eastern and southern walls of the temple. In 1240, the army of Gaur attacked Tripura. Though the king, Chheng Thump Fa, was afraid to give battle, his valorous queen took to the battlefield and defeated the invaders. Her name, incidentally, was Tripurasundari. It is possible that the temple was a fort at that time, and that later Dhanyamanikya transformed it into a temple and dedicated it to the Divine Mother.



*Rani Tripurasundari in battle, 1240 CE*



The name of this illustrious queen of history probably got intermingled with that of the Devi in the memory of her subjects. It is also possible that the historical queen got deified in the minds of the masses over the centuries; they have been worshipping Mother Divine whose veritable representation they witnessed in the heroic queen.

A fortress turned into a temple reminds one of the terrible aspect of the Devi. According to local legend, there were times when the execution of dangerous prisoners was seen as a sacrificial offering to the Devi. But the Divine Mother was propitious to the Manikya rulers in their days of prosperity. And when the Manikya kings turned inefficient, she inspired Shamsher, a Muslim, to take control of her temple. She is clearly the Mother of all. She again is “‘Time’, the All-Destroyer,” as Swami Vivekananda describes her in his celebrated poem, ‘Kali the Mother’. The Buddhist Mogs have worshipped her; the Hindus have worshipped her; and the Muslims have worshipped her too. Now all of them come to the temple and worship her together. Life is a circle, never a straight line. One half of this circle is the benign face of the Mother. Without the other half, representing her terrible aspect, life remains incomplete. The history of the Tripureshwari temple brings out this profound truth.

### The Mythological Background

Mention of Shamsher Gazi’s or Dhanyamanikya’s dreams may appear to be unnecessary in a discussion of the history of the Tripureshwari temple, but the objective historian cannot fail to note the changes in the course of history that are associated with these dreams, though the latter were entirely subjective in nature. Dreams are phantasmagoria, wonderful creations of the mysterious mind—yet they often shed more light upon the gloom of the past than matter-of-fact historical data. Analogous to dreams are myths, though they are not subjective to the same degree. Myths are projections of the creative energy of the human mind, and carry the germs of many grand discoveries in the fields of philosophy and spirituality.

The ancient legend of the *pīṭha-sthānas* is well known. Sati, Shiva’s divine consort, was born to king Daksha Prajapati, who had little regard for Shiva. In spite of her father’s dislike, Sati was betrothed to Shiva and married him. Later, Daksha arranged for a sacrifice, to which he invited all the gods except Shiva. Though uninvited, Sati went to the sacrificial ground; but she could not bear to hear her father abusing Shiva and gave up her life. When the news reached Kailas, Shiva’s abode, the demons of Shiva killed Daksha and destroyed his sacrifice. Shiva appeared on the sacrificial ground, but was overcome with grief at the sight of Sati lying lifeless on the ground. He lifted her lifeless frame to his shoulder and started dancing the dance of dissolution in the form of Nataraja. To rid Shiva of his attachment and save the earth from destruction, Vishnu, the protector of the universe, dismembered Sati’s body into numerous parts with his celestial discus, Sudarshana. The severed members of the Mother’s frame, scattered in different directions, touched the ground at fifty-one different places, and these are worshipped as *pīṭha-sthānas*. Relieved of Sati’s body, Shiva stopped dancing, became calm, and sat down in deep meditation.

This legend has been recorded in many texts—the *Shiva Purana*, *Kalika Purana*, *Pithamala Tantra*, *Kubjika Tantra*, and others. The *Bṛihadbhārata Purana* says:

*Yatra yatra satidehabhāgāḥ petuḥ sudarśanāt  
te te deśā dharābhāga mahābhāgaḥ kilābhavan;  
Te tu punyatamā deśā nityam devyā hyadhiṣṭhitāḥ  
siddhapīṭhāḥ samākhyātāḥ devānāmapī durlabhāḥ.  
Mahātīrthāni tanyāsan muktikṣetrāṇi bhūtale.*

The places where parts of Sati’s body—separated by Sudarshana—fell, became blessed holy places, where the Devi dwells forever. These are called *siddha-pīṭhas*, sites of perfection, places that are difficult even for gods to reach. These are great places of pilgrimage, places of liberation on earth.

The *Pithamala Tantra* says:

*Tripurāyam dakṣapādo devī tripurāsundarī;  
bhairavastripureśaśca sarvābhīṣṭaphalapradāḥ.*

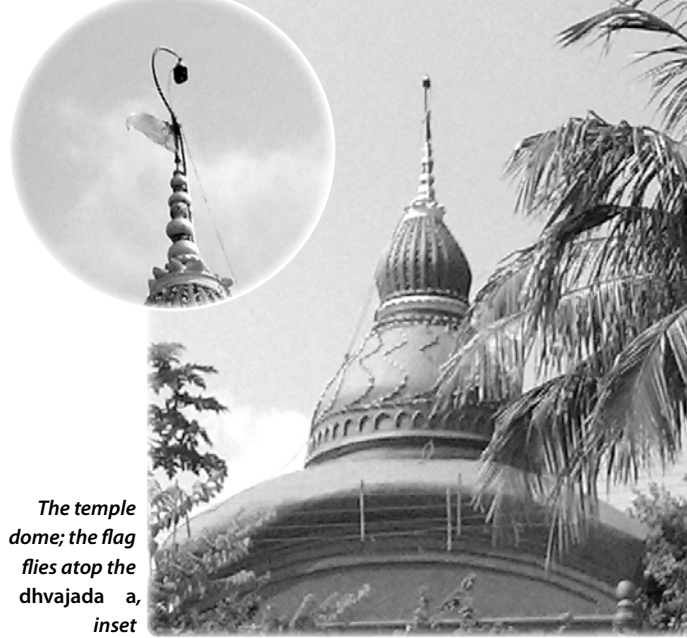
In Tripura (fell) the right foot (of the Devi); the Devi here is named Tripurasundari, and her consort is Tripuresha, the fulfiller of all desires.

Incidentally, Udaipur also has a temple dedicated to Tripuresha.

At the time when Dhanyamanikya received Mother's instruction to bring her over from Chittagong where the Mogs were worshipping her, his general Raykachag was busy fighting the Mogs in Chittagong. During the course of his movements, Raykachag accidentally found himself on a hilltop in front of the Devi's temple. It was a dark new moon night. Raykachag opened the temple door and saw a small and lovely girl of dark complexion with dishevelled hairs smiling at him. Taken by surprise, he asked her who she was. 'I am the Goddess of the universe,' the girl replied, her sweet and sonorous voice reverberating in the valley. 'You are fortunate in having had my vision. Go and fight the battle of your life. Be victorious!'

The battle won, and the army heading for Rangamati with the Devi's image atop a huge elephant, the king received another instruction in dream: the image was to be installed at the place they would reach at sunrise. At sunrise, the party found itself on a raised piece of land, much like the hump of a tortoise shell, *kūrmapṛṣṭha*. According to Tantric tradition, such land is especially suitable for Tantric worship. This is the spot where the Tripureshwari temple stands today.

The legend of Daksha's sacrifice has its own symbolic significance. Keats wrote: 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. Shiva stands for truth; Sati for beauty and auspiciousness. They are inseparable. When one tries to satisfy one's desires ignoring truth, beauty and auspiciousness depart from one's life. Destruction follows. This is the personal meaning of Shiva's tandava dance. Yet, guarding against this terrible aspect of the Deity represented by Nataraja Shiva is the protective power of Vishnu, which provides respite from disaster within the realm of space and time. The different parts of Sati's body are symbols of beauty and auspiciousness that have been lost. They are the objects of worship and medi-



The temple dome; the flag flies atop the dhvajada a, inset

tation. Through such meditation, one learns to respect truth, and by perfection of this meditation one becomes identified with the truth that is one with beauty. Auspiciousness and beauty then return to one's life; the lost empire is regained.

### Architectural Symphony

Let us now pay a visit to the temple. We are standing in front of the western gate. Our sight is naturally attracted to the magnificent dark red structure made of burnt bricks that the temple is. The temple top is designed in provincial *charchala* style—the roof slopes down in four different directions from the apex—much like the Kali temple at Kalighat, Kolkata. The apex has a dome shaped like a budding lotus, resembling a Buddhist stupa. Atop the dome is a spire with seven small pitchers of diminishing sizes mounted one over the other, and capped by a brass flagpole, *dhvajadanda*, with an upturned metallic *āmalaka* (Emblic myrobalan), reminiscent of the Nagari style of north India. The temple walls are eight feet thick, and the exterior is marked with several horizontal ridges. Each of the four corners has semicircular minarets embedded into the walls, a feature that is associated with Islamic architecture. Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and provincial styles have all merged in the architectural symphony of the temple.

We now ascend a short flight of stairs to get on



to the 'turtle's back'—the spacious temple precincts. To the left is a small temple to Shiva, the guardian angel of this sacred spot. This, however, is not the Bhairava Tripuresha, whose temple is five kilometres from this place. We offer our salutations to Shiva and move towards the main temple right at the centre of the compound. North of the shrine are the temple offices and the hall where devotees partake of prasad. To the south, there are rooms for the priests.

A number of beautiful white swans waddle across the temple courtyard. We let them pass and move to the *balighar*, a small roofed terrace housing the sacrificial altar. To the right is a huge jack-fruit tree, spreading its branches over the roof of the altar.

Adjacent to the *balighar* is the spacious *nat-mandir* or music hall where devotees and local minstrels offer devotional songs to Mother. There are drums and other musical instruments here. A number of huge bells hang from the roof of the music hall. These the devotees ring prayerfully. The northern and southern walls of the music hall both have four doors.

We cross the music hall and emerge through the eastern door. We are now in front of the door to the shrine, receiving Mother's benign glance.

### **Mother Tripureshwari**

Mother's black basalt image, usually draped in a red-bordered sari, stands upon the supine form of

*Temple wall with minarets, horizontal ridges, and peephole*



her consort Shiva, the symbol of the Absolute. Her feet are reddened with *alakta* and adorned with red hibiscus flowers. She has the appearance of a small dark-complexioned girl. Her ovoid face has three eyes; the two horizontal eyes are round in shape and carry the mixed expression of the benign and the terrible. Her small nose bears a huge ring that touches her protruding tongue. She has four hands: the lower left hand holds a severed human head and the upper a blood-stained sword. The upper right hand forms the *abhaya-mudra* assuring freedom from fear; and the lower right hand bears the *vara-mudra*, offering boons to her children. She wears a golden crown, and her long, flowing locks add to the beauty of her countenance. Hanging from her neck is a necklace of thirteen decapitated human heads. She represents the terror of destruction as well as the assurance of motherly tenderness. Hers is the appearance of an anxious mother waiting for her long-lost child. The majestic presence of Mother Tripureshwari evokes awe in the minds of devotees, and this is reflected in their supplications to her.

The interior of the shrine is dark, lit up only by a lamp placed in a small niche in the wall. To the left is a slightly raised slab on which the officiating priest sits.

To her right there is another small image of Mother Kali. She is called *Chhoto Ma* or Little Mother. While the image of the main deity is 1.57 m high, that of the Little Mother is only 48 cm high. Little Mother's appearance resembles that of the main deity, and it is believed that her image graced the shrine even before the image of the main deity was installed here. Some hold the opinion that the Buddhist Mogs used to worship her before the temple was built. The image was apparently found immersed in a nearby pond. Little Mother is presently worshipped as *Chandi*, since according to Tantric tradition two images of Kali cannot be worshipped in the same temple.

Another interesting feature of this temple is that along with Devi, Vishnu too is worshipped here in the *śalagrāma*, an aniconic image. We have noted that Dhanyamanikya had first decided to dedicate

the temple to Vishnu, but changed his decision after his remarkable dream. Later, the royal priest assured him that it would not be wrong to worship both Vishnu and Kali in the same temple. During his visit to the temple in 1892, Kailash Chandra Singha, the editor of the extant text of *Rajamala*, had noticed an inscription on the temple wall which opened with the phrase 'Māyā murāreriyamambikā yā; this Ambika (Mother) is the divine maya of Murari (Vishnu)'. So Vishnu and Ambika are one. This is reflected in the profound sense of unity among various religious cults that pervades the spiritual atmosphere of the temple.

### A Profound Sense of Unity

Every autumn, at the time of Dipavali, a village fair is held round the temple. People from different parts of the state, irrespective of social or religious affiliations, join this fair to enjoy the festive atmosphere. Colourfully decorated shops come up, and devotees, their foreheads marked with vermilion, are seen carrying small earthen pots filled with sweets to be offered to Mother. Dhoti-clad middle-aged men, sari-clad women, hill women in their provincial dresses—*ria* and *pachra*—cell-phone wielding young boys and girls in their assorted outfits, and foreign tourists with iPods plugged into their ears make a colourful panorama. A symphony of languages—Bengali, Hindi, English, Kokborok, and Chakma—fills the air. Loudly yelling children crowd the ghat at Kalyansagar—the big pond behind the temple—to watch centenarian turtles surface slowly, extend their heads like mysterious question marks, and eat the puffed rice they throw to them.



Devi Tripureshwari

The Vajrayana, Sahajayana, and Kalachakrayana schools of Buddhism popularized the abstract philosophical precepts of Mahayana by incorporating them in the worship of concrete symbols and pantheons that developed around such deities as Tara, Nairatmyadevi, and Prajnaparamita, each of whom reified abstract spiritual principles. Later, the Hindu Tantras assimilated these Buddhist gods and goddesses into their fold.

Tripura was the land of Buddhist Sahajayana; the ongoing excavations at Pilak—an ancient Buddhist site a hundred kilometres from Agartala—provide archaeological proof for this. Were the Buddhist Mogs worshipping the image of Tripureshwari as Taradevi at Chittagong? It is said that worship is never discontinued at a *pīṭha-sthāna*. There are *pīṭhas* where the Goddess is worshipped without any image. Was Matabari one such place before the temple was built? Or did the image of the Little Mother receive worship from Buddhists as Tara at that time? Did the Mogs immerse the Devi's image in a temple pond, unable to carry it with them while leaving? Whatever may be the case, even today Buddhists in this state hold this shrine at Matabari in deep respect.

To the Muslims, Tripureshwari is their Matai Thakurani. In his *Gazinama*, the chronicle of Shamsher Gazi's career, Sheikh Munahar records that when Mother appeared to Shamsher in his dream, she introduced herself as Matai Thakurani. Munahar also records that Shamsher worshipped Mother through the traditional ritual of sixteen offerings, *ṣoḍaśopacāra*. In Islam, worship of any image or picture is prohibited. But Shamsher listened to the voice of his heart, a dictate that is far greater than that of all religious dogma. Even now, devout




Old Temple and  
Bhairava Tripuresha,  
Mahadev-bari

*galim* respectively; they belong to the tribal community of Tripura. The guards deputed by kings to protect the temple were Muslims. Appointed in various responsibilities, these men of different castes and communities are equally respected and enjoy equal privileges. This mutual love and respect binding different communities together is a unique tradition of the Tripureshwari temple.

Muslims bear tender feelings of devotion towards Mother Tripureshwari, and some even offer the first produce of their vegetable gardens to her.

Many of the kings of the Manikya dynasty were devout Vaishnavas, yet they had deep regard for the Divine Mother. If you visit the temple at about nine in the morning, you will find devotees sitting in the Natmandir, chanting praises to the six Goswamis, the renowned teachers of Vaishnavism. On my recent visit to the shrine I heard one devotee chant an obscure hymn that describes Sri Krishna's revelation of the cosmic form of the Divine Mother to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, much in the manner of the similar description in the Bhagavadgita.

The priests of the temple are brahmanas. Those who clean the sanctum, pluck flowers from the garden, and clean utensils belong to the *kayastha* community and are called *taluas*. Men belonging to the *malakar* community make garlands. Those who ritually light the temple torch every new moon night and conduct animal sacrifices are called *jolai* and

Motion in a world of friction involves the play of opposing forces. Life is a continuous attempt at unfoldment amidst the perpetual strife between the divergent powers of self-denial and self-expression. This interplay of forces is the motivating factor that has kept humanity moving through the intricate turns of history. The Divine Mother is the source of the energy behind this tension. Yet, in her lies that point of calm where contradictions meet. In unifying conflicting human emotions, Mother Tripureshwari has become the matrix of socio-cultural synthesis in Tripura. 

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2. Dhruvaranjan Sen, *Matabarir Upakkhan* (Agartala: Prantar Prakashani, 2007).
3. Brajendranath Datta, *Udaipur Bibaran* (Agartala: State Council for Educational Research and Training, 1991).
4. Puranjan Prasad Chakravarty, *Tripura Rajamala* (Agartala: Parul Prakashani, 1997).

## The Tripureshwari Temple: A Beautiful Imagery

The outer courtyard of the temple represents the outer world of the senses. The *balipitha* symbolizes *tamas*, harmful habits and tendencies that have to be mercilessly sacrificed. The *natmandir* or music hall stands for *rajas*, which generates art and culture; these are to be given a godward turn. The main temple stands for *sattva*, the purified body and mind. The holes on the wall are like the sense organs through which one reaches out to the world of sense-objects. The sanctum stands for the heart of the devotee, where the darkness

of ignorance is removed by the lamp of knowledge. The Shalagrama represents the enlightened *buddhi*, intellect. The image of the Little Mother—which lay immersed in a pond for a time and was later restored—stands for *chitta*, memory. Mother Tripureshwari is the dynamic aspect of Shiva, the transcendent, unmoving principle. The temple reminds us that a spiritually awakened person, being aware of the presence of the Mother in his or her heart, engages in the battle of life in a spirit of joyous dedication.

# REVIEWS

For review in PRABUDDHA BHARATA, publishers need to send **two** copies of their latest publications.



**Nearer Heaven than Earth:  
The Life and Times of  
Boshi Sen and  
Gertrude Emerson Sen**

Girish N Mehra

Rupa, 7/16 Ansari Road, Daryaganj,  
New Delhi 110 002. E-mail: [info@rupa-books.com](mailto:info@rupa-books.com). 2007. xxiv + 815 pp. Rs 995.

How would the mind of a leading agricultural scientist, who was also the principal scientific collaborator of Jagadish Chandra Bose, work? What if he also happened to have received the grace of Sri Sarada Devi, secured the blessings of Swami Brahmananda, and undergone a particularly tough period of training with the first disciple of Swami Vivekananda? And when the story of this man is woven in with that of an Emerson, who was an editor of a leading international magazine, and who had not only the spirit of adventure to go around the globe at a time when 'globalization' was not a household term but also the empathy to live and identify with people in remote corners of India, then you have a narrative that is both engaging and instructive.

In bringing to life the story of Boshi and Gertrude Sen, Girish Mehra has not only used the resources available to him through many years of association with the Sens at Almora, he has also put in considerable additional research to unfold the panorama of life in the twentieth-century and place this story in the context of contemporary cultures, relevant philosophical and religious thought currents, and the complex socio-political matrix that was then being woven. The rich concourse of interesting personalities populating the text—Sister Christine, Swami Virajananda, and Ram Maharaj; Gandhi, Nehru, and Indira; Lowell Thomas and T E Lawrence (of Arabia); Uday Shankar and Alaaddin Khan; Einstein and Jung; Tagore and Pearl Buck; Asgar Ali and Ambia—along with the generous sprinkling of anecdotes, personal details, and nuggets of history holds one's interest even when serious philosophical issues are discussed.

This book should interest a wide range of readers, for it is about people whose interests were sweeping and achievements remarkable in their own way.

PB

## BOOKS RECEIVED



**Bold Message for World Peace**  
Swami Vivekananda

Ramakrishna Math, Mylapore, Chennai  
600 004. E-mail: [srkmath@vsnl.com](mailto:srkmath@vsnl.com).  
2006. 46 pp. Rs 15.

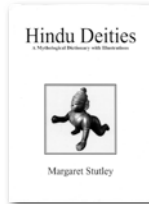
A short selection of Swami Vivekananda's thoughts on religious conflicts and the way to harmony.



**The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki:  
An Appraisal**  
Swami Harshananda

Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore 560 019.  
E-mail: [rkmblr\\_publi@vsnl.net](mailto:rkmblr_publi@vsnl.net). 2005.  
vi + 89 pp. Rs 25.

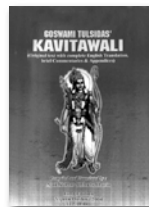
A lucid introduction to the Ramayana story and the characters and ideals it features.



**Hindu Deities**  
Margaret Stutley

Munshiram Manoharlal, 54 Rani Jhansi  
Road, New Delhi 110 055. E-mail: [mrml@vsnl.net](mailto:mrml@vsnl.net). 2006. xx + 187 pp. Rs 525.

This 'Mythological Dictionary with Illustrations' should serve as a handy reference tool for scholars and students of Hinduism.



**Goswami Tulsidas' Kavitawali**  
Comp. and Trans.

Ajai Kumar Chhawchharia

36 A Rajghat Colony, Parikrama Marg,  
PO Ayodhya 224 123. 2004. ix + 213 pp.  
Rs 50.

# REPORTS

## **Sri Sarada Devi Birth Anniversary**

The birthday of Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother, was celebrated at Belur Math on Sunday, 30 December 2007. Thousands of devotees attended the celebration throughout the day. Cooked prasad was served to about 31,000 devotees. Srimat Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj, President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, chaired the public meeting held in the afternoon.

## **Annual Meeting of Ramakrishna Mission**

The 98th Annual General Meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission was held at Belur Math on Sunday, 16 December. It was chaired by Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj. In all, 135 monastic members, 60 lay members, and 56 associates attended the meeting. A report follows on page 181.

## **Achievements**

Sri Pradip Majhi, a former student of the **Blind Boys' Academy, Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur**, won the 'National Award for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2007' for his outstanding performance as most efficient self-employed person. Smt. Pratibha Patil, President of India, handed over the award to him at Rashtrapati Bhavan on 3 December, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. On the same day, Sri Bhabesh Barman and Sri Deb Kumar Maity, also former students of the Blind Boys' Academy, received the West Bengal State Awards for the year 2007 from Sri Gopalkrishna Gandhi, Governor of West Bengal, in recognition of their outstanding performance as most efficient self-employed persons.

Sri Vivek Karmakar and Sri Prasenjit Roy, both students of the Department of Sanskrit Studies,

*Birth Celebration of Sri Sarada Devi: Devotees queue for Mother's darshan at Belur Math, above; receiving prasad, right. Below: Swami Prabhanandaji addresses the General Meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission*



**Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, Belur**, won the first and third prizes respectively in the All India Elocution Competition on Swami Vivekananda in Sanskrit held at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, on 13 December.

## **News from Branch Centres**

The newly constructed building for a kitchen and dining hall at **Ramakrishna Math, Coimbatore**, was inaugurated on 30 November.

The Swami Vivekananda Mandapam and Sabhangana or meeting hall were inaugurated at **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission**,





Left:  
Sri Pradip Majhi  
receiving  
national award  
from Smt.  
Pratibha Patil

Cyclone Sidr: makeshift shelters on a road; living amidst the devastation; receiving relief (clockwise from top)

**Kadapa**, on 2 December at its new Mission campus by Swami Harshananda, President, Ramakrishna Math, Bangalore. About one thousand college and high school students attended the programme.

On 10 December, Srimat Swami Smaranandaji Maharaj, Vice President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the newly built first floor of the students' home at **Ramakrishna Math, Cooch Behar**, and laid the foundation stones for the ashrama's main gate and the guest quarters for senior monks.

The newly constructed first floor of the high school building at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Ramharipur**, was inaugurated on 12 December.

## Relief

Centres of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission conducted relief in the month of December 2007 as follows:


**Cyclone Relief** · Bangladesh: The Dhaka centre continued extensive relief operations for thousands of cyclone victims. During the last month, it distributed 399,510 kg rice, 1,095 kg dal, 2,190 kg potatoes, 1,490 sets of utensils, 2,834 saris, 2,987 lungis, 220 other garments, 4,903 blankets, and 883 hurricane lamps to 45,601 cyclone-affected families

of Bagerhat, Barguna, Barisal, Gopalganj, Khulna, Patuakhali, and Pirojpur districts. Relief work is continuing.

**Winter Relief** · During the last month, 6,437 blankets were distributed through the following centres to people affected by the severity of winter. Baranagar Mission: 2,200; Chandipur: 500; Chapra: 630; Coimbatore Mission: 300; Ichapur: 800; Jalpaiguri: 200; Karimganj: 1,000; Malda: 557; Raipur: 250. Also, Baranagar Math distributed 120 woolen chadars, and Chapra centre distributed 283 sweaters.

**Fire Relief** · Bhubaneswar centre distributed 700 blankets to families whose houses had been ravaged by devastating fire at Mali Sahi and Mahimanagar areas of Bhubaneswar.

**Flood Relief** · Belgharia centre, as a part of post-flood relief work, distributed 1,038 biscuit packets, 218 blankets, 1,126 saris, 1,062 dhotis, 1,226 shirts, and 307 frocks to 2,515 people affected by floods in two blocks in Burdwan district and one block each in South 24-Parganas and West Medinipur districts. Relief work is continuing.

**Distress Relief** · Centres in Kolkata distributed the following items to people of nearby areas. Baranagar Math: 45 dhotis, 230 saris and 125 other garments; Baranagar Mission: 200 saris. 

## General Meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission: Synopsis of the Governing Body's Report

The 98th Annual General Meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission was held at Belur Math on Sunday,

16 December 2007, at 3.30 p.m.

The members recorded with deep sorrow the

passing away of Swami Gahananandaji Maharaj, the fourteenth president of the Mission, on 4 November 2007. He was ninety-one. He worked tirelessly for twenty-seven years at Seva Pratishthan hospital in Kolkata, serving sick and suffering people. He travelled extensively in India and abroad, spreading the message of Vedanta and Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda. His demise is an irreparable loss to the organization. Swami Atmasthanandaji Maharaj was appointed the fifteenth president.

During the year under review, the Mission started a new centre at Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh and a new sub-centre at Belgaum in Karnataka.

In the medical field, the following new projects deserve special mention: the starting of a mobile eye care facility by Itanagar centre, a medical centre at Jammu Ashrama, and a National HIV/AIDS control programme in collaboration with the German Leprosy Relief Association by Kamarpukur centre.

In the educational field, the following new projects deserve special mention: starting of postgraduate courses and programmes by Vivekananda University at its faculty centres at Narendrapur, Swami Vivekananda's Ancestral House, and Ranchi (Morabadi); postgraduate courses in Mathematics and Sanskrit at Vidyamandira college of Saradapitha centre in Belur; a number of educational programmes by Coimbatore centre, including information technology and online education programmes; and eleven pre-primary education centres by Lokasiksha Parishad of Narendrapur centre.

In the rural development field, the following new projects deserve special mention: a rural sanitation project by Itanagar centre; tailoring centres near the Line of Control under the Jammu and Kashmir Earthquake Economic Rehabilitation Programme by Jammu centre; a number of projects related to, among others, fruit plantation, spice cultivation, seed production, harnessing spring water for irrigation, and residential bridge courses for dropout village girls by Ranchi (Morabadi) cen-

tre; and a number of socio-economic rehabilitation projects related to, among others, vocational training programme for skill development, lac cultivation, dissemination of renewable energy, artificial insemination, and animal health care by Lokasiksha Parishad of Narendrapur Ashrama.

Under the Ramakrishna Math, the following new developments deserve special mention: starting of a new centre at Vadodara in Gujarat; inauguration of a hostel building and a hall at Dhaneti in Kutch district by Rajkot Ashrama; a dispensary building at Antpur Ashrama; an additional building for nursery and primary school at Madurai Ashrama, and a self-employment project by Cooch Behar Ashrama.

Outside India, two centres were started: a Math centre at St Petersburg, Florida, USA, and a Mission centre at Durban, South Africa.

During the year, the Math and Mission undertook extensive relief and rehabilitation programmes in several parts of the country involving an expenditure of Rs 3.87 crore, benefiting 5.67 lakh people belonging to 1.30 lakh families of 2,027 villages.

Welfare work was done by way of providing scholarships to poor students, and pecuniary help to old, sick, and destitute people; the expenditure incurred was Rs 6.25 crore.

Medical service was rendered to more than 85.32 lakh people through 15 hospitals and 173 dispensaries including mobile medical units; the expenditure incurred was Rs 61.55 crore.

Nearly 3.39 lakh students were studying in our educational institutions from kindergarten to postgraduate level. A sum of Rs 111.60 crore was spent on educational work.

A number of rural and tribal development projects were undertaken with a total expenditure of Rs 18.62 crore.

We take this opportunity to express our heartfelt thanks to our members and friends for their kind cooperation and help.

Swami Prabhananda  
General Secretary  
Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission